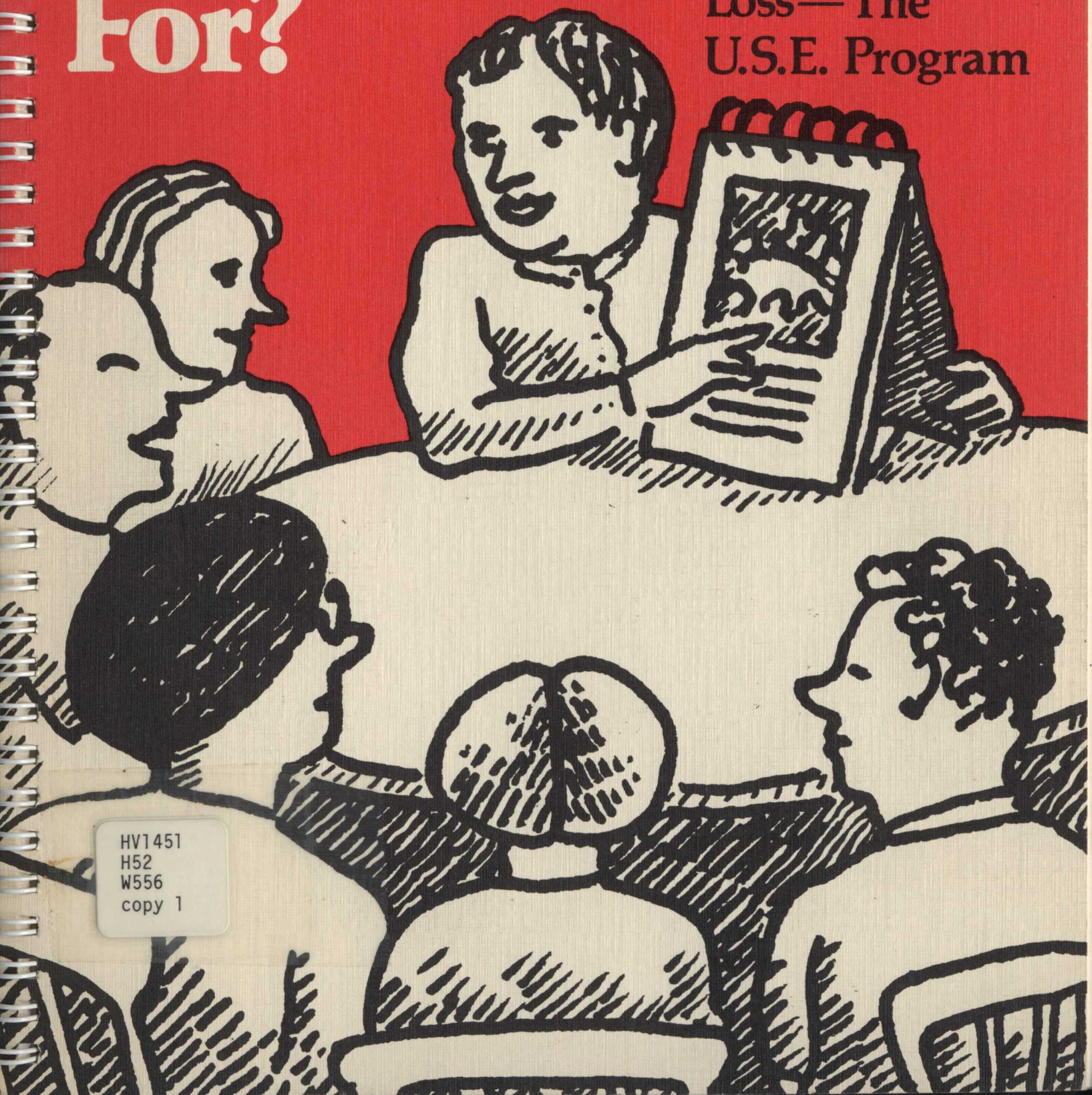
# What Are Friends For?

## Self-Help Groups For Older Persons With Sensory Loss—The U.S.E. Program



HV1451
H52
W556
copy 1

M.C. MIGEL LIBRARY
AMERICAN PRINTING
HOUSE FOR THE BLIND

# What Are Friends For?

## Self-Help Groups For Older Persons With Sensory Loss— The U.S.E. Program

By
Lorraine G. Hiatt
Robert Brieff
Jaime Horwitz
Cheryl McQueen

American Foundation for the Blind
New York, 1982

**Credits**

Editors, Judith A. Eisler
Jan Zimmerman
Designer, Susan B. Abbott
Illustrator, Jon Agee

HV1451
H52
W556
copy one

© Copyright 1982 American Foundation for the Blind.

These materials were developed in part with a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging, entitled, "Uses of Self-Help and Mutual Aid in Compensating for Sensory Changes in Old Age," Grant #0090 AR 0012, 1980-81. However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and no official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should be inferred.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Main entry under title:
What are friends for?

1. Self-help groups. 2. Aging. I. Hiatt, Lorraine G.
HV547.W52 1982 362.4'154'0880564 82-18170
ISBN 0-89128-110-X

Published by American Foundation for the Blind, Inc., 15 West 16th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011. Printed in the United States of America.

# CONTENTS


ACKNOWLEDGMENTS v

THE COMPLETE "WHAT ARE FRIENDS FOR?" PACKAGE ix

INTRODUCTION 1
The U.S.E. Program
Using The Program Materials

Chapter One — HOW TO GUIDE SELF-HELP DISCUSSIONS 5
General Tips For Discussion Moderators

Chapter Two — PLACES AND THINGS 23
Making Your Personal Environment Work For You

Chapter Three — NEAR AND FAR VISION 45
Making Close Work And The Visual Surroundings Easier To Use

Chapter Four — HEARING AND UNDERSTANDING 79
Improving Communication With Others

Chapter Five — MEMORY AND RECOLLECTIONS 101
Remembering The Things We Don't Want To Forget

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many groups and individuals contributed to the development of these materials by generously sharing with us their personal experiences and their practical advice. Our appreciation and thanks go to:

Members of Archer Avenue Senior Center
Bonnie Huie, Program Director
Jamaica, New York

Members of Central New York Association for the Hearing Impaired
Sally McSween, Counselor
Syracuse, New York

Members of Hamilton-Madison House
Kathy McNevin, Social Worker
New York, New York

Members of Marien Hein Residence and Senior Center
Ruth Lindberg, Director
Brooklyn, New York

Members of Nagel Avenue "Y" Senior Center
Hannah Isner, Program Director
New York, New York

Members of Peekskill Senior Center
Barbara Risoli, Director
Peekskill, New York

Members of Town of Mt. Pleasant Senior Center
Lorraine Burkey, Community Outreach Worker
Valhalla, New York

Members of VIP's (Visually Impaired Persons)
Lockport Senior Citizens' Center
Linda Van Buskirk, Director
Lockport, New York

---

The insightful comments and recommendations from the following consultants greatly enhanced the quality of these materials. Their encouragement, critical thinking, and generous contribution of time are deeply appreciated.

Frances Dory, Director
New York City Self-Help Clearing House
New York, New York

Barbara Felton, Ph.D., Associate Professor
Research Center for Human Relations
New York University
New York, New York

Mrs. Ruth Greene, Administrator
New York League for the Hard of Hearing
New York, New York

Bella Jacobs, Project Director
Senior Center and At-Risk Older Persons
National Council on the Aging
Washington, D.C.

Morton A. Lieberman, Ph.D., Professor
Committee on Human Development
Department of Behavioral Services and
Department of Psychiatry
University of Chicago
Chicago, Illinois

James H. McCartney, Ph.D., Audiology Consultant
Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology
California State University
Sacramento, California

Sally McSween, Counselor
Central New York Association for the Hearing Impaired
Syracuse, New York

Po-Ling Ng, Director
Open Door Senior Center
New York, New York

William Padula, O.D.
National Consultant on Low Vision
American Foundation for the Blind
New York, New York

Susan J. Spungin, Ed.D.
Director of National Consultants
American Foundation for the Blind
New York, New York

Mimi Winer, President
Fran Weisse, Resource and Information Specialist
Vision Foundation, Inc.
Newton, Massachusetts

Stephen A. Zarlit, Ph.D., Assistant Professor
Andrus Gerontology Center
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, California

---

We wish to recognize the work of Melissa Hager, who helped formulate and write the original grant proposal and who participated in the first six months of the project.

Great appreciation goes to Lilly Perlmutter, Project Secretary, whose diligent work helped shape and clarify the materials. And many thanks also to Alice Ryan who was always willing to lend a helping hand.

At the Administration on Aging, our grant officer, Theron Fuller, provided support and assistance when it was needed.

John Mulvihill, Director of Public Communications Department at the American Foundation for the Blind, lent his support and advice.

Susan Islam, Senior Information Specialist in the Public Communications Department, American Foundation for the Blind, provided the guidance, creative writing talent, and technical skills that made the project slide-tape presentation possible.

Peter Hanke, Director, Talking Book Department; William P. Howell, Manager and Don Weightman, Assistant Production Manager, Recording Department—American Foundation for the Blind—coordinated the taped versions of the report.

---

A special thanks goes to the people who shared their thoughts with us and allowed us to record and photograph them in their "personal environments." Their comments and photographs, used with their permission in this program guide and in the slide-tape presentation, added greatly to our understanding of people and places.

Hope Bagger, New York, New York

Margaret Butler, Loris, South Carolina

Rachel DuBois, Woodstown, New Jersey

Pauline Goodman, Miami, Florida

Edgar Gruenstein, New York, New York

Kay Heniford, Loris, South Carolina

Mitchelle Hickman, Loris, South Carolina

C. B. and Ethel Housand, Loris, South Carolina

Adrian Lowell, New York, New York

Rebecca Page, Loris, South Carolina

Helen Scherer, New York, New York

Fred Stellato, Peekskill, New York

Lalla Stevens, Loris, South Carolina

Sara Worley, Loris, South Carolina

—With appreciation

Lorraine G. Hiatt
Principal Investigator

Robert Brieff
Project Coordinator

Jaime Horwitz
Research Associate

Cheryl McQueen
Research Assistant

# The "What Are Friends For?" Package

**"What Are Friends For?"** is a self-help/peer discussion program for older adults coping with changes in VISION, HEARING, and MEMORY. Participating individuals learn to appreciate the value of their own ideas and to help themselves while helping others. They are encouraged to share their experiences and to compare notes on what works for them, what doesn't, and what might be worth trying. No previous experience is necessary to lead effective self-help group discussions. Everything you need is included in the basic program package.

## Basic "What Are Friends For"? Package

**"What Are Friends For?" Guidebook.** Provides general tips on how to guide self-help discussions. Specific "how-to's" are also offered—practical suggestions to explore with each other and to try: how to adapt the environment to meet individual needs; how to improve communications with others; how to use vision more effectively; how to remember what you don't want to forget.

**"What Are Friends For?" Big Pad.** A flip chart with large captioned illustrations that correspond to the major ideas covered during the discussions. This visual aid illustrates important points and provides a focus for the specific subject being discussed.

**"What Are Friends For?" Poster.** Depicts older people working together to solve common problems associated with changes in vision, hearing, and memory. It is designed to stimulate the interest of potential participants and to publicize the date, time, and place of discussion sessions. Five copies of the Poster are included with each package so that sponsoring organizations can distribute them widely in the community.

**Complete package $24.95**

## Optional Components

**"What Are Friends For?" Slide-Tape Presentation.** Introduces potential group members to the self-help discussions concept and to the topics covered in the **"What Are Friends For?"** program. Color, 10 minutes, audible and inaudible beep tones. Copy of script included.

**$29.95**

**"What Are Friends For?" Guidebook cassette edition.** **$5.00**

**"What Are Friends For?" Guidebook foreign language translations** (without illustrations): Spanish, French, and Italian. Free on request with purchase of basic package.

**Additional Posters.** **5 for $3.75**

To purchase any of these materials, or for further information, contact the American Foundation for the Blind, 15 West 16th Street, New York, New York 10011.

# The U.S.E. Program

**Us. Senses. Environment.** These three words are the key to U.S.E., a program of discussions for older adults about learning and sharing ways to cope with changes in sight, hearing, or memory that often accompany aging. U.S.E. provides the background information and support materials needed for effective group discussion and problem-solving. The materials may also be used by individuals for information on self-care related to these topics.

Because such difficulties as seeing detailed items, conversing with others, forgetting things, and moving around the home have no simple, prescribed answers, participants in U.S.E. discussion groups can draw on their own experiences and ingenuity to devise practical solutions to troublesome situations in daily life. They learn to identify their own needs, to adjust the physical and social environment for their convenience, and to make up for the loss of one sense through better use of others.

U.S.E. program discussions include information about making the best use of senses, much of which has been previously available only to professionals. The information is presented in the context of group meetings with equals, rather than lectures by "experts." This allows participants to compare notes freely on what helps and what doesn't. . . and what just may be worth trying. And equally important, this process encourages older people to appreciate the value of their own ideas, and to help themselves while helping others.

You need not have had experience leading a group before to moderate a U.S.E. program. What really matters is that you like being with people and enjoy working with others to solve problems.

## Topics In The U.S.E. Program

The following topics are covered in four different discussion sessions. A group can decide to do any or all of the topics, in the order suggested below:

**Places And Things:** Making Your Personal Environment Work For You—an introduction to becoming more aware of the physical surroundings; how we use them, how we are affected by them, and how we can arrange them to meet our needs.

**Near And Far Vision:** Making Close Work And The Visual Surroundings Easier To Use—a discussion for persons with visual problems about how to make the best use of vision, prevent fatigue, and make activities more convenient and enjoyable by using appropriate lighting, contrast, sizes, seating, and rest breaks.

**Hearing And Understanding:** Improving Communication With Others—a discussion about how to arrange the environment and improve conversation habits for better hearing and understanding.

**Memory And Recollections:** Remembering The Things We Don't Want To Forget—an exploration of ways to improve our abilities to remember and to relieve needless worry about memory changes.

## Who Can Use U.S.E.?

Because the U.S.E. program respects and builds upon each individual's particular experiences, anyone who is interested in these topics can join in. Whether someone notices a change in hearing, vision, or memory, knows somebody else who is having difficulty, or just wants to stay informed, he or she will be able to learn from and contribute to a U.S.E. discussion.

The information in this program is especially appropriate and valuable for persons over the age of sixty, and offers special benefits to various participants:

**People with Serious Sensory Difficulties:** can learn to adjust for their losses by making the most of remaining sight or hearing, and by using other senses to compensate. Someone who has had a hearing problem for a long time, for example, may learn from a session on vision, while serving as a "voice of experience" for a discussion on hearing.

**People Not Experiencing Sensory Changes:** can learn to reduce stress when using their senses, to handle sensory losses if they occur later in their lives, and to assist others who are presently having difficulty. Gaining both knowledge and empathy better equips group members to cope with sensory changes experienced by themselves or others.

**People Not Aware of Sensory Changes:** can learn to recognize changes that may have been ignored or attributed to something else.

**What U.S.E. Does Not Offer:** The U.S.E. program is not intended to be a substitute for professional advice! There will be times in your sessions when it is appropriate to suggest that individuals or the group contact a professional for information about vision, hearing, memory, and other subjects.

# Using The Program Materials

The first chapter of this guidebook, "How To Guide Self-Help Discussions," describes the principles behind the U.S.E. program, suggests ways to be an effective moderator, and explains basic concepts of group discussion. To highlight some of the main guidelines, quotes are included from older people who contributed their ideas during the development of this program.

To get the most out of the U.S.E. program and the support materials provided, read this chapter before turning to specific discussion topics you wish to moderate. The suggestions in this guidebook and the visual materials provided, along with your own interest and enthusiasm, are all you need to be a successful group moderator. However, if you have ever conducted a meeting, been a member of a club, served on a committee, organized activities, or taught a class, by all means draw on your knowledge to help you hold an interesting discussion.

To interest possible participants in the idea of self-help groups, you

may want to obtain the U.S.E. slide-tape presentation, "What are Friends For?" (available from the American Foundation for the Blind).

Following is a description of the components of the basic U.S.E. program package. Before moderating a discussion, you will need to familiarize yourself with the chapter topic and the visual aids for that session. For any of the optional program materials (see p. ix for description and cost), contact AFB.

## The Four Discussion Sessions

Chapters 2-5 of this guidebook summarize information on the goals for each session, and include a "recipe" for encouraging group discussion and problem-solving. Each of these chapters also offers Additional Suggestions for visually or hearing impaired group members, and Background Reading for more information. The section of each chapter entitled Where Do We Go From Here? contains ideas for Further Discussions for groups wishing to spend more time on any particular topic. Also included are other Resources and References.

The following sections in each chapter comprise the "recipe" for an effective session, and are designed for use at the meetings:

**One: To Keep In Mind:** a reminder of special considerations for each topic, and effective ways to guide the discussion.

**Two: Just Before The Meeting:** a checklist of preparations for the session, including suggestions for materials to bring, how to arrange the meeting room and support materials, and how to introduce yourself and the topic of the day.

**Three: Getting Started:** a set of questions to stimulate thinking about the topic and related personal experiences, and to instill confidence in everyone's ability to participate.

**Four: Guiding The Discussion:** a series of questions for moderating the discussion, designed to provide information about the topic, and encourage participants to share problems, as well as common sense solutions.

**Five: Ending The Discussion:** steps to follow for closing a session on a positive note, and making plans for the next meeting.

**Take Home Pages:** a summary of important points to photocopy prior to the meeting and to distribute to group members. These handouts, which are the last pages of each chapter, serve as instant reminders of the session and help people share what they have learned with their friends and family.

## The Big Pad

The Big Pad is a large, self-standing, "visual helper" with illustrations and captions which correspond to ideas covered during discussions. The Big Pad is placed on a table or chair next to you, the moderator, so that everyone can see it easily, especially those who have trouble hearing. You, your co-moderator, or a member of the group should flip the Big Pad pages as new points are brought up and should read each caption aloud. The illustrations

and captions will help you remember important items, while also reminding the group what subject is being discussed and when a subject has changed.

A sighted moderator or participant can describe the illustrations on the Big Pad to visually impaired members of the group in a way that allows them to form mental images of points being made in the discussion. For hearing impaired participants, the Big Pad is especially useful for clarifying important points and making subject changes clear.

## The Poster

The Poster is a colorful wall hanging that depicts older people working together to solve common problems associated with changes in vision, hearing, and memory. It is designed to stimulate the interest of potential participants and to publicize the date, time, and place of discussion sessions.

# Chapter One HOW TO GUIDE SELF-HELP DISCUSSIONS

## General Tips For Discussion Moderators

# Planning Ahead

With a little planning and forethought, you can make your discussion group much more effective. In addition to familiarizing yourself with the chapter devoted to each session, the following steps can make you feel more prepared and confident about moderating discussions, and will also put participants at ease.

## Getting People Involved

Existing organizations, including senior centers, church or temple societies, clubs, volunteer associations, or neighborhood groups are excellent places to find people who might be interested in participating in self-help discussions.

Sometimes it is helpful to hold a preliminary meeting to acquaint people with the U.S.E. program. You might make a presentation yourself, or you can ask a staff person from another organization to help you introduce the idea. If interested people haven't met together before, this is a good opportunity for them to begin getting to know one another.

Showing the U.S.E. program slide-tape presentation, "What Are Friends For?" is one way of creating interest, whether you are introducing the program to other potential group moderators, or to potential group members. The presentation describes and summarizes the program through excerpts from actual group discussions and individual experiences about coping with sensory changes. (To obtain a copy, contact the American Foundation for the Blind.)

You may need to use some basic publicity tools to let people know about U.S.E. and your introductory meeting. Three good ways to try are: word of mouth, telephone calls, and posting notices in places where people will be sure to see them. Don't forget to include a telephone number and/or address where you can be reached. Some organizations also have radio announcements, newsletters, and other ways of informing visually or hearing impaired members. Since people often need encouragement to try something new, you may want to ask community or organization leaders to help you recruit members. You can also use these methods to remind members of your group about an upcoming meeting.

## Finding A Partner

Whenever possible, especially if you are moderating a group for the first time, try to share the responsibility with someone. Whether getting people involved or guiding a discussion, teaming up can lighten your load and add to your enjoyment of the program.

It's important to figure out ahead of time what each member of the moderating team will do. Both of you should be familiar with the guidelines provided in this chapter for leading group discussions, as well as with the chapter for the session topic. Team moderators of other groups have found that splitting the job in two works well if one person takes responsibility for the content of the session, while the other person encourages participation from everyone in the group and handles some of the other tasks that need to be done, like keeping track of time. If two of you are

going to lead a series of U.S.E. groups, you can also trade places each time.

It is fine for two different members of the group to lead each meeting, allowing everyone to share the responsibility and enjoy the self-confidence that comes from being a moderator. If you are visually or hearing impaired, you may want to team up with a sighted or hearing partner.

Being respectful of each other's ways of handling things is important for both of you, as well as for the entire group. Remember to be understanding and tolerant of your partner's style. During the discussion, you may need to prompt each other about important points, bring up suggestions, or summarize a particular subject.

After each session it's a good idea to review what happened with your partner so you can use techniques that worked again and change those that didn't.

If you feel uncertain about leading a group, try holding a practice discussion first with a few friends. Don't hesitate to ask someone on the organization staff to help you set up a "trial run."

## Sharing Other Responsibilities

There are many tasks that members of the group can assist you with. At the beginning of a meeting, you can ask for volunteers to:

- Keep track of time
- Turn pages of the Big Pad
- Write down hints suggested during discussions
- Prepare refreshments
- Arrange chairs and tables
- Call people to remind them about the next meeting

When people share the duties of running a group they have a greater sense that the meeting belongs to them. This provides an incentive for members of the group to provide mutual assistance to one another, rather than having the group function like a committee or a class. If there are no volunteers to handle these tasks, co-moderators should split the list between them.

## Getting Acquainted

One of the most important things you can do to build an effective self-help group is to know something about the people who are in it and to help everyone get to know each other. What activities are they most interested in? Do any or all of them have sensory impairments they are concerned about? What languages do they speak? What significant events have happened during their lifetimes?

"One of the big mistakes we make [is] assuming that a person of a certain age . . . is like everybody else within those age limits. He's anything but like everybody else! . . . So treat people as individuals. Then the next thing is to treat them with respect. Because older people expect respect as much as they did when they were middle-aged. And they don't like it when they don't get it!"

—Hope Bagger
New York, New York

It's a good idea to hold a preliminary meeting or take some time at the beginning of your first session to give people the opportunity to become better acquainted and discover what is important to one another.

## The Size Of The Group

These materials work best with groups of eight to ten people, including the moderators. When more than twelve people participate, it becomes difficult to hold a discussion. If you have a very large group, try to divide into two sections that meet at different times or in two different rooms.

Occasionally it is not possible to limit the size of your group. If this happens, select portions of the material that seem most important to you and try to break down into small groups of six or eight after thirty minutes. You and your partner can then go around to each small group, encouraging participants to share their ideas about the topic among themselves.

## Arranging The Meeting Place

A well-arranged meeting place can make a tremendous difference to the success of your group, especially for older adults with hearing or visual impairments.

"We have had that Sunday School room—benches—turned around at least four or five times, different angles, in order to help us with our lighting . . . We're a senior group and we couldn't see very well. The bulb was too small. So Mr. Broadway, our pastor, suggested we put in a fluorescent light, which we did. Now we can see better to read . . . And at that time we had just a curtain between the adult ladies and the adult men. And one aggravated the other . . . The men would complain that Mrs. Duncan talked too loud and that we talked too loud . . . And you know when men get to laughing and talking, they have a big noise. So we'd shake the curtain to get them to quiet down . . . and after a while they'd start back again. So the Sunday School put a solid wall between us, which works better."

—Rebecca Page
Loris, South Carolina

Take the following things into consideration when selecting a place to hold your discussions:

- Is the room located on the ground floor and convenient to lavatory accommodations? Stairs, and even elevators, may pose difficulties for some people.

- Is the meeting place quiet and located away from possible interruptions? Background noises like traffic or air conditioners should be muffled or eliminated. Try to avoid meeting in noisy recreation or multi-purpose rooms which are used by others at the same time. It is very hard to hear and pay attention in a dining room where people are eating or clearing away dishes. If other activities are going on around you, try to change either the time or place of your meeting.

- Is the size of the room suited to the size of the group? It can be very uncomfortable to have a few people sitting in one corner of a large, empty hall, and it can be harder to hear there, too.

- Is the room well-lit, and without glare? Set up chairs and arrange curtains so that when watching others speak or looking at the Big Pad, no one has to look into the sun or bright light.

- Are people seated in a circle so that everyone can see and face each other? Many people rely on lip-reading to aid their hearing without realizing it. Arrange seating to allow space for walking aids and for people in wheelchairs. Leave room for easy entry and exit.

- Is there a table for people to write on in case they want to jot down a few notes? Or even just to lean on?

- Is the room temperature comfortable?

## Keeping Track Of Time

For most people, an hour-and-a-half session is best for good concentration and participation. It is important to know your group members and pay attention to their needs. You may want to have a ten minute break in the middle if you see that people are becoming uncomfortable. Or you can stretch once or twice during the session, asking people to stand up and stretch their arms and legs while staying near their seats.

About halfway through your meeting, "take stock" of the session to see if you will be able to finish the meeting within the allotted time. If you are running behind, it is better to schedule another meeting than to rush through the topic. Every group goes at a different pace, so don't worry if this happens. It just means that everyone is very involved! And speaking of time, be sure that your meeting will not conflict with traditional eating hours. Hungry people become tired and distracted more easily, and have more trouble remembering what took place.

Since it is so easy to lose track of time during a meeting, don't

hesitate to check your watch, or take if off and put it on the table where you can see it easily. Even better, your partner or someone else in the group can keep track of time. It's a good idea to let everyone in the group know what time you expect the discussion to end.

Throughout this guidebook you will find a suggested length of time for each activity. Of course, you should adjust these times to meet your own group's needs and interests. There isn't any magic formula for using these materials, so if your group wants to spend more time on one section and less on another, suit yourselves.

# Four Building Blocks

When you are preparing for and moderating a discussion, bear in mind the four basic principles of the U.S.E. program described below, and point them out to members of the group.

## Taking A Fresh Look

Considering all the things we must do each day, it is hardly surprising that we ignore many parts of our physical surroundings. Even if we notice changes in our vision, hearing, or memory, we often continue to ignore how the surroundings may contribute to, or even cause, some of the problems associated with these changes.

For example, as people get older they often complain that their eyes feel tired after short periods of reading. Some people check with their eye doctor; others just accept this as an inevitable part of aging. How many stop to think that the light they are using may be part of the problem? And possibly part of the solution!

"I have a lamp [high] over the dining room table and I just put it up there recently. And I found that every time I sat at the table to read, my eyes would hurt. Then I check the wattage that I have up there, and I've only got three 60-watt bulbs—not enough light at all. . . So I'm going to rewire the whole thing to take bigger bulbs."

—Fred Stellato
Peekskill, New York

## Putting The Blame Where It Belongs

Unlike Fred, many people blame themselves for a problem that may be caused by something in the outside surroundings. Have you ever done this? When the steps of the bus were too difficult to climb? When the TV set next door was so loud you didn't hear the telephone ring? When someone borrowed your address book and you couldn't recall your daughter's phone number? If some people in your group think that their vision, hearing, or memory problems have only to do with themselves, explain to them that their surroundings may be part of the problem. Remind them that, "It may be your problem, but it's not all your fault. Let's put the blame where it belongs."

## We Are Our Own Best Friends

Older people possess a great deal of knowledge about coping with problems and about changing their physical surroundings to meet their needs. Anyone who has had to manage with an impairment in vision, hearing, or movement for a period of time has many tips to offer on how to handle things.

"So far as hearing goes, . . . it depends on the voices and the sounds of the room. . . . Where everything is quiet, I would say would be the best place. And then some positions, I would say, would help some, too, I can turn my heard, or put my hand over my ear or back of my head. Sometimes I can get better sound that way. So I try about everything I can."

—C. B. Housand
Loris, South Carolina

But common sense knowledge like this is often taken for granted —people may not realize how valuable their ideas and discoveries may be to others. If someone in the group has found a solution to a common problem, like preventing slips in the bathtub, that hint helps everybody else! And the person who has found the solution enjoys the pleasure and self-confidence that comes from helping others. For many of the issues that arise during a discussion, there are no expert opinions or easy answers, but individuals can share what experience has taught them and what "works" for them. As a group leader, encourage people to share their unique solutions to difficult situations resulting from sensory changes or impairments.

## Learning From Each Other

Although a lot of information is exchanged during a U.S.E. discussion, this is not a traditional classroom—where only the teacher has the knowledge. Instead, with respect for the experience of **each** member of the group, everyone is both learning and teaching.

"Always you have to stay one step ahead of the game, and you always have to learn from each other. Because if I see you doing something, you know I just have to say, well how can I apply that in my life to make it easier, and that's how I have been learning. . . So that's what I meant when I said we have to learn from each other. There's always something."

—Anonymous
New York, New York

For you as a discussion leader, this means that you become a moderator, rather than a lecturer (What a relief!). Sometimes people expect the group leader to play a "teaching" role; sometimes a leader can just "fall into it" without being aware of it. However, being an authority may discourage people from contributing their own ideas. Conducting a U.S.E. meeting means that you and your partner:

- Present a topic for discussion in a way that allows group members to talk about it from their own experience;

- Maintain order and keep the discussion on track;
- Realize that you don't know all the answers—and you are not supposed to.

# Beginning The Meeting

Remember how awkward you felt the first time you danced with someone? Well, leading a group for the first time is much the same. The hardest steps are the first ones. After that, you and everyone else will relax. Below you will find suggestions for getting a meeting off to a good start. A reminder list of these points is included under the heading Just Before The Meeting in each chapter so there's no need to memorize them.

## Being Prepared

Just as in other situations, you can make things run more smoothly if you prepare in advance. Come ahead of time to arrange the meeting place and make sure you have everything you need. Ask yor co-moderator or people who arrive early to help you with arrangements. Some things to check:

- Chairs arranged around a table, or in a circle with paths for easy entry and exit
- Good light, without glare
- Little or no background noise
- Comfortable room temperature and ventilation
- Ample space for movement and display

Ask people to assist you with setting up these items which you need to bring for this meeting:

- This guidebook
- Copies of the Take Home Pages for everyone
- Pens for anyone who might want to take notes (black felt-tipped pens are easy to read)
- Big Pad (open to the first picture on the discussion topic)
- Table, chair, or easel beside your chair for the Big Pad
- Watch or clock
- Paper for a list of Hints To Try
- Name tags for everyone, especially if there are new members in your group

## A Friendly Welcome

After everyone has arrived, start the group by introducing yourself and sharing something about your own interests or circumstances; perhaps why you volunteered to run this session. This personal touch will make everyone feel more comfortable and willing to share their thoughts. It's not much different from the warm smile and hearty welcome you use to greet guests at a party.

It is a good idea to go around the group in a circle and have people introduce themselves. If possible, have each person say one sentence about him or herself; perhaps why they are interested in this topic or why they decided to come to a U.S.E. meeting. Use name tags or repeat people's names clearly to help everyone remember names.

## Introducing The Topic

Hand out copies of the Take Home Pages so that people can make notes and so they have a personal reminder of the important points of the day. This will relieve any concern people may have about remembering new information.

The more clearly you state the subject and describe the focus of the discussion, the less anxiety members of the group will feel. In each chapter under the heading Just Before The Meeting, you will find a concise introductory statement which describes the goals and subjects for each session. It's fine just to read these few sentences aloud. Familiarizing the group with what is expected of them and what the group will accomplish will make it easier to guide the discussion and keep people on the right track.

Let everyone know that the meeting will last about an hour and thirty minutes. This includes about fifteen minutes for introductions and the Getting Started activity, sixty minutes for the actual discussion, and fifteen minutes for closing the discussion. In each chapter, you will find additional suggested time breakdowns for each subject, as well as a reminder to take a break or stretch.

## Sharing The Four Building Blocks

Encourage group members to particpate and share their own experiences and hints with others. Explain that you are not an authority; each person has learned to be an expert problem-solver in one way or another. U.S.E. groups are designed to encourage people to be aware of circumstances in the world round them, and to be creative problem-solvers, rather than blame themselves for things they can't control. Remind the group of these points at appropriate times.

## Getting Started

The Getting Started activity is a brief set of questions that is especially designed to help everyone think about experiences related to the topic and give everyone confidence about participating. Make sure that each person gets a chance to respond, even if it means asking some people direct questions while requesting that others hold back. The early involvement of each person will reward the group with a much more interesting discussion!

## Hints To Try

As ideas are offered during the discussion, ask your co-moderator or a volunteer to make a list of Hints To Try along with the names of people who suggest them. Each time a hint is suggested, remark on its importance, thus reminding your recorder to write it down and rewarding the group member for sharing his or her suggestion. Remember that you can share your hints or experiences, too.

At the end of the session, this list will be read aloud to remind the group of all the good ideas that everyone brought up. To ensure that these hints remain available to the group even after the meeting is over, ask someone to make copies to distribute, or post the list at the next meeting.

# Guiding The Discussion

Guiding a discussion requires keeping people focused on the topic, believing that listening is as important as talking, and having a sense of humor! Below you will find some guidelines for moderating a discussion in a way which both draws on the experiences of group members and allows new information to be presented.

## Being A Skillful Juggler

Since the benefits of a session come from a combination of ideas contributed by members and information contained in this book, you may feel like you're doing a juggling act. Don't despair! After you've stated a point of information, refer to examples already mentioned, or ask participants to describe other actual examples from their own lives. For instance, if you've just talked about the problems of adapting from bright to dim light, ask people to think about times when this happens, like coming indoors on a bright sunny day, or going into a movie theater. As long as participants stay on the subject, they should be doing most of the talking, not you. It won't take long for you to become a good "juggler."

## Staying On Track

No matter how well planned your discussion is, members of the group may wish to discuss something that seems unrelated to the topic, but is important to them. First, try to determine if there is some relationship, even a distant one, to the topic at hand, and connect the two ideas. For instance, if someone brings up a question about hearing during a session on vision, you might point out ways that the two senses are related. "Well, Mrs. Green, it's interesting that you mentioned that. If we have good lighting and can see people's faces clearly, we actually can understand what they are saying better. Can anyone think of other ways in which our vision affects our hearing?"

If someone brings up a topic that will be covered later, try to put the question on the back burner. Otherwise you will wind up jumping from one subject to another, which is confusing for both you and group members. You might say, "Thank you. You've

brought up a very good point. We'll be discussing how to have good lighting in spite of the high cost of electricity in just a few minutes. Would you help us to remember to bring up your information about fluorescent lighting then?"

## Giving Advice

Since so many different hints may be suggested during a meeting, it's not surprising that some of them may not seem correct. What works for one person will not automatically work for another. As the moderator, you can set an example for how to "give advice."

Telling people they **should** do something can be very annoying. But if you preface your suggestion with phrases like, "In my experience," or "What worked for me was. . .," or "What do you think would happen if you tried. . .," people will be more receptive to your suggestions. It will not seem as though they are forced to try your solutions.

Be prepared for some people to reject the suggestions of others. Everyone has particular habits or ways of doing things. New ideas need time to sink in or may just not be right for someone. Allow people to **choose** what's right for them.

Finally, some people may have misconceptions or misinformation about aging and vision, hearing, or memory. If someone offers information that seems questionable or contradictory to material in the following chapters, remind the group about individual differences and make note of questions that should be answered by a professional in that area. Don't hesitate to refer someone to an expert when professional advice seems warranted. If a number of questions arise during a meeting, you, your partner, or a volunteer could call a professional for answers and report back to the group the following week. You may even want to ask her or him to speak to your group.

## Using Everyone's Examples

During the Getting Started activity and throughout the meeting, people will bring up situations from their own lives in response to your comments and questions.

"How I found out was at a wedding. I would be sitting over here on a couch and they're over there discussing something. Everybody is listening and joining in, and I couldn't hear what was being said. . . It's difficult to hear across the room. . . If somebody says something to me that I can't hear, then I get up and I go over there and I say, 'I'm sorry, I didn't hear you. I'm not hearing so well.' "

—Anonymous
New York, New York

Personal examples that people give about their own physical surroundings make the information in this book more meaningful. Give people a chance to come up with their own responses before using the examples or tips given in these chapters. Try to remember

some of these situations and the people who mentioned them—you or your co-moderator might even write them down—so that you can refer to them later.

For instance, when Mrs. Bukowski describes sitting and reading by a window with sheer curtains, you can use her curtains as an example of how to reduce glare from direct sources of light. And don't forget to mention Mrs. Bukowski by name.

## Using First-hand Experiences

Sometimes an event will occur in a meeting that illustrates a point you are trying to make. That first-hand experience will help people remember useful techniques. Perhaps you will ask people to move their chairs around facing one another so everyone can see; or perhaps somebody will complain about the glare from the sun. Any circumstance like this gives you a perfect opportunity to say, "That's the very idea we are talking about!"

## Laugh A Little

Okay, so you aren't Henny Youngman, or Bob Hope, Gracie Allen, or Phyllis Diller. But you can still use a funny line yourself or encourage humor during a group discussion. When people are discussing serious issues that affect their health and ability to function, a good laugh or a wry comment can help relieve the tension and relax the group. But of course, remarks should not be disrespectful or belittle someone's problem.

# Ticklish Situations

There is no magic formula for a discussion and no cast-iron script for what will occur. Ticklish situations are almost inevitable when groups of people get together, so if some of these awkward circumstances should arise, don't worry that it's because of something you've done wrong. Below you'll find suggestions for handling "ticklish situations" with courtesy and tact.

## Getting Back On Track

Sometimes all attempts to keep a discussion focused will not succeed. If you see that one person's concern is causing others to lose interest in the discussion, it's time for you to take some direct, but pleasant action. You might make a comment similar to this: "That sounds very interesting, George, and it's also important, but right now we are talking about recent memory and your story is about a long time ago," or "But right now let's give someone else a chance to talk."

Be alert, also, to the possibility that someone may not have heard or understood a question or idea. An unrelated response may be due to a simple misunderstanding that you can clear up quickly.

## Too Much Of A Good Thing

Listening to one another is just as important to a good discussion as talking, but sometimes people forget this courtesy. Several people may hold a side conversation that distracts others who are trying to hear the main discussion, or several people may try to address the group at the same time. Gently, but firmly, remind the group that "one at a time" is a necessary rule.

Incidentally, side conversations are more apt to occur if people cannot hear the person speaking, if they are seated in rows far away from the focus of the group, or if the speaker has gone on too long. Be sure to ask whether everyone can hear the speaker clearly; if necessary, rearrange the chairs in a circle, or ask people to move closer together.

## Monopolizers

Occasionally, one or two people will start to do most of the talking. To get more balanced participation, you will need to make a direct, but tactful statement. Thank the talkative person for his or her contribution and then say, "Let's hear what some other people have to say about this," or "Let's each take a turn at this topic before we come back to you." Since talkative people generally have a lot of energy to share, ask their assistance with a job like keeping time or recording hints at the next meeting. That's a way to put those energies to good use.

## Encouraging Participation

One of your jobs as discussion moderator is to encourage everyone to participate. You or your team moderator can assist a shy or reluctant person to speak up by calling on him or her by name at least once during the discussion. By phrasing your question carefully, you can give a quiet person a choice about joining in. "Mr. Allegretti, do you have anything you'd like to add to that?"

## Sparking Discussion

Sometimes people have difficulty responding to general questions. An example of a more general question would be, "What have you done to make your home more comfortable?" If you find that after asking this type of question, group members are slow to respond, try more specific follow-up questions like, "Where do you sit when you watch TV, Mrs. Mendoza?"

## Conflict And Contrast

If you put three people in the same room, inevitably you will have four opinions. Differences of opinion can be a source of tension in a group that meets only occasionally, leaving no time for people to accept their differences with each other. You can reduce tension by inviting additional opinions from other group members. For example, you might say, "Mrs. Goldberg and Mr. Young have different opinions here. I wonder what the rest of you think about this?" or "Maybe there's some truth in both points of view. How

do you see it?" Acknowledging a conflict of opinion is important; it needn't be avoided or smoothed away as trivial. But you can help your group take a positive view of conflict by considering how interesting it is to gather divergent ways of looking at the same thing. If everyone already thought the same way, there would be nothing to learn from each other—and what a dull world that would be!

## When Someone Gets Upset

Although it's unlikely at this type of meeting, there's always a chance that someone may get upset, start to cry, or perhaps get angry. What should you do as the moderator in such a situation? Most importantly, don't ignore it! If someone cries or is disturbed about a comment, make a supportive statement: "I'm sure that at one time or another everyone here has felt badly," or "That's okay—is there anything we can do to help?" Sometimes such an episode can have the beneficial effect of making everyone in the group feel a bit closer.

Again, if someone is angry, don't ignore it. The important thing is to put some brakes on the anger and keep it from growing. To interrupt the anger and give the person or persons a chance to calm down, you might say, "Well let's call a time-out here," or "Let's catch our breath a minute." Once again, invite other group members to comment on what's happening. You can also tell the angry individuals that you'll speak with them at the break or after the meeting to straighten things out.

## Answering Questions

Whenever you are a discussion moderator people may expect you to have the answers to questions that you cannot or should not answer, such as what medications they should use in their eyes or whether they need a hearing aid. Politely decline to answer questions that seem outside the scope of the meeting or the scope of your knowedge. A U.S.E. session should be a give-and-take discussion **among equals,** not a personal question-and-response event with the moderator set apart as an authority.

If a question arises that is important to the group as a whole, but no one in the group has an answer, do some brainstorming with the group to make up a list of people who might know. Appoint someone from the group to contact the appropriate expert and report back to the group at another session, if possible.

Remember, too, that the U.S.E. program is not meant to be a substitute for professional advice. Refer people to their doctor, social worker, or family as needed.

## When Someone Says, "Nothing Helps"

When someone flatly states that a situation can't be changed, evaluate the comment carefully. Perhaps a sympathetic and understanding remark which acknowledges the person's difficult situation is called for. If you feel the person is reacting too hastily, try saying something like this: "Think back. Did you ever change your mind about something you believed in strongly? Maybe

there's a chance that can happen here, if you give this some time."

Having a sensory or other physical handicap can be frustrating and can cause people to feel that there is not much that can be done to help. If someone is expressing such a negative feeling, sometimes you can be helpful by asking the person to re-examine his situation. A question like, "Are there any times when this is less of a problem for you?" may allow the individual to realize that the circumstances are not entirely hopeless. This realization may in turn open the door to more constructive problem-solving.

# Ending The Discussion

Well, you've made it this far and it's time to close the session. It's as important to end a discussion well as it is to open one. These steps for closing a discussion are also listed in each of the chapters for use at meetings:

**Summarize:** You, your co-moderator, or someone else should summarize the main points of the discussion by reviewing the captions on the Big Pad.

**Hints To Try:** Ask everyone to help you review the good ideas they suggested to each other. Make a list of these Hints To Try to give group members or post at the next meeting.

**Important Reminders:** Announce the date, time, and place of the next meeting. If your group has an open-ended schedule, you may choose to spend a second session doing the supplementary activities listed at the end of each chapter under Where Do We Go From Here? This decision, which should be based on the consensus of the group, will depend on its interests and the length of time available.

**Closing Comments:** Be sure to thank everyone for participating. Go around the circle and ask each person to comment briefly on what they learned or what they liked or disliked about the session. Not only does this process provide valuable feedback, but it reinforces the participation of every individual, just as the Getting Started activity did.

"You know, we are creatures of habit. . . The trouble with us, I think, is that we've gotten into this habit and don't stop to think that maybe there **is** a better way of doing it. This whole deal has given us food for thought. . . I'm going to concentrate more and maybe I **can** find a better way."

—Fred Stellato
Peekskill, New York

# Additional Considerations

Although discussion groups with visually impaired or hearing impaired members are quite similar to discussions with any group, there are certain communication tips that moderators can use to ensure that everyone gets the most out of a meeting. Many of the points given below are merely good speaking habits which would enhance communication with anyone. You might want to photocopy these tips and make them available to the group.

## Visually Impaired Persons

- Have people call their names clearly at the beginning of the meeting, so that the voice and location of each person is known.
- When reading from the Big Pad or other sources, identify the source so that people can distinguish between the moderator's ideas and other contributions.
- Use audible reinforcements, such as "uh-huh," "yes," or other short comments to provide the encouragement that eye contact and head-nodding provide for sighted persons.
- Be active and direct in calling on people when you sense they are about to make a statement. This assistance from the moderator lets a potential speaker know that he or she will not conflict with someone else's turn to speak.
- Avoid lengthy silences that become uncomfortable for people who cannot get information from the facial expressions of the moderator or other group members.
- Fill lengthy silences by directly encouraging people to contribute comments, by posing specific questions to individuals, or by moving on to the next topic.
- Make your descriptions of objects or of illustrations on the Big Pad very vivid by using many specific adjectives and adverbs.

## Hearing Impaired Persons

- Ask people at the beginning of each session if they can hear your voice. Speak louder if necessary, but do not shout. Use a microphone if the group is large.
- Speak distinctly, but do not exaggerate.
- Speak at a moderate pace, not a rapid one, and try not to drop your voice at the end of a sentence.
- Try to use a low-pitched tone of voice; it is easier to understand.
- Ask the group to remind you and others to speak louder, slower, or more distinctly.
- Provide paper and pens for note-taking.
- Sit in a well-lit circle for face-to-face contact.

- Face people when you speak, and don't hide your mouth with your hands.
- Nod or point to people to help them take turns speaking.
- Be sure that everyone follows changes in the subject by stating directly that changes are occurring. (Turning the page of the Big Pad also serves as a clear indicator.) Make sure that everyone understands the new topic before going on. If the new topic is not clear, try saying it in another way.
- Repeat questions or comments to ensure that they are heard and understood.
- Pause after proper names or unusual words, and check to make sure that they are understood.
- Summarize and repeat main points from time to time. (The Big Pad is helpful here.)
- Take one or two extra five-minute breaks to replenish the energy needed for concentration.

## All Groups

- Communicate points in several ways. Use the written word, illustrations on the Big Pad, verbal expressions, and captioned visuals. Listen to recordings, describe pictures, and pass objects around the group.
- Avoid shadows on speakers and use the lighting tips suggested in Chapter 3, "Near And Far Vision."
- Avoid visual distractions, such as patterned wallpaper or pictures on the wall behind the Big Pad or behind speakers. Use plain backgrounds to avoid confusion.
- Avoid noisy distractions and use the hearing tips suggested in Chapter 4, "Hearing And Understanding."
- Allow time for people to understand and respond to questions and comments.

# Where Do We Go From Here?

At the end of chapters 2-5 you will find a list of suggested ideas for further discussion or action on each topic. If you have a group that is interested in continuing to meet, take time at the end of the sessions to decide which activities your group would like to do, or make up ideas of your own. "How-to" follow-up discussions can provide the encouragement and specific information needed by group members to begin to make improvements in their own habits or environments.

Often it is not just our personal environment, but the larger social environment that creates special difficulties. Participants can use the information and skills they have gained by "helping

themselves" through the U.S.E. program to help others in the community. Schools, hospitals, churches, senior citizen centers, parks, and recreation centers all have people who can benefit from U.S.E. Such places in the community can also benefit from group members' ideas about how to make their facilities and services more convenient and enjoyable.

The list of resources and organizations in each chapter is a good way to start joining with others to bring about change. Helping others may turn out to be the best way of all to help ourselves.

# Chapter Two PLACES AND THINGS

## Making Your Personal Environment Work For You

# Introduction

## Let's Take A Fresh Look

As we go about our day-to-day activities, we often take the world around us for granted. Our homes, the stores we shop in, and the streets we walk on have become so familiar we hardly take notice. In fact, the equipment in our kitchens, desks and cleaning closets, and the arrangement of our furniture may also be taken for granted. It's this combination of places, arrangement of furnishings—lights and chairs and special things—which we shall call the personal environment.

Imagine, though, how many things you would notice about your surroundings if you suddenly woke up one morning inside a spaceship! You would think about the view of the earth and the stars from the window; how quiet it is in outer space; the brightness of the sun. Try to image that your home, your ordinary surroundings, are as new to you as the inside of a spaceship. Do you notice the morning light? The smell of coffee? Sounds on the street?

As long as everything continues as usual, we remain accustomed to our physical surroundings. But sometimes, because of changes in ourselves or circumstances beyond our control, the environment becomes an obstacle. A light in a dark hallway burns out. A handrail by an icy or slippery staircase may work loose from the wall. As we try to negotiate a suddenly difficult environment, we may blame ourselves for being clumsy or growing older without identifying the problem as the burned-out bulb or the broken handrail. We need to find ways to help each other adapt or change environments instead of putting up with poorly arranged or equipped settings.

By paying attention to the world around us, we can become aware of "friendly" and "unfriendly" conditions in our environment that affect how well we are able to manage our daily lives. We may even find that making small, practical changes in the surroundings gives us more time to do the things we need and like to do.

Changes like this are probably not a new idea to you. After all, people make small and large alterations to their homes for all kinds of reasons. Some of the changes happen seasonally, like bringing out storm windows, closing in a porch, or putting in a fan. Others happen only because of the departure or arrival of a family member or houseguest, like putting out a clean set of towels or rearranging a closet. We make some changes just for pleasure—displaying a new photograph or planting a garden.

What may be a new idea, however, is making adjustments in our surroundings because of changes in our vision, hearing, memory, or ability to get around. Learning more about our surroundings and our senses can teach us how to overcome limitations.

To make the environment work for us, we must pay attention to

the private places where we take care of things for and by ourselves, as well as the places where we spend time with other people. This is different from home decorating; it means finding practical ways to change those places to be more suitable for our daily tasks and needs. Replacing a lightbulb or fixing a handrail are two examples. A simple matter of closing out distracting noises, improving lighting in the kitchen, bathroom, back hall, etc., or rearranging a desk drawer to readily locate objects—for example, a set of keys—can be the little "helps" in our everyday lives.

In the U.S.E. program these kinds of ideas are called "tips" or "hints," helpful ways of using the physical environment to cope better with the sensory changes that occur as we grow older. This discussion, like the other three sessions of the U.S.E. program will:

- Sharpen awareness of the physical environment
- Alert us to the direct relationship between the surroundings and how well we are able to use our senses and handle our responsibilities
- Build upon the knowledge and experience we have already gained about adjusting to sensory changes and aging

Most everyone can benefit from sharing information on aging, the environment, and the senses. However these issues have a special meaning and importance for people with new responsibilities as a result of changes in their own or a family member's sight, hearing, memory, or general health.

Most of us are accustomed to a home environment that evolved over years of habits and routines. For many women, this means a home organized around the needs of family members. For many men, this means a home that has been organized **for** them—by a woman, whether a wife, mother, or sister. While there are many exceptions to these routines, it may be interesting for the group to discuss the ways we manage home environments today, and how improvements can be made.

Someone may be taking on new responsibilities caring for a member of the family who has lost some sight, hearing, or even memory. A person who now lives alone may no longer be able to rely on someone else's eyes or memory. The process of sharing information with other people facing similar challenges can be a source of comfort and support.

This discussion will allow participants to get to know each other if they have't met before. For those who are already friends or acquaintances, it will be an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of each other's background and current living situation. Most important, the discussion will enable all the participants to think about ways to make their personal environments work for them.

## Visually Or Hearing Impaired Persons

Environments may take on a particular importance to older people who have experienced some loss of vision and/or hearing. Too often, sensory losses have been "treated" only with medical attention and mechanical aids. There is more to independence than that. As we grow older, the physical environment is an increasingly significant part of the whole system of independence. Among other things, the environment can work to:

- Aid mobility
- Encourage socializing and conversation
- Prompt memory

In this set of discussions and group meetings, the environment is thought of as a tool of independence. For people who have lost some or all hearing and/or sight, the arrangement of furniture and objects, the organization of kitchens and other rooms, the use of light and special seating can help to ensure the most convenience and comfort to satisfy their needs.

# One: To Keep In Mind

☐ For a discussion totaling one hour and thirty minutes, plan approximately:

- 15 minutes for introductions and Getting Started
- 1 hour for Guiding The Discussion
- 15 minutes for Ending The Discussion

Additional time breakdowns are suggested in the guide. Also take time for a stretch break about midway through the meeting as noted.

☐ Make sure each person gets to respond to a question during Getting Started. This may mean asking some people direct questions, and asking others to hold back.

☐ Listen for the words people use to describe the surroundings and use their words when asking questions or encouraging discussion.

☐ As you discuss each topic during the session:

- Refer to and repeat the examples people give during Getting Started to illustrate points;
- Encourage people to come up with their own responses before using examples or tips given in the guide, or shown on the Big Pad;
- Use the Big Pad as a visual reminder of the topic being discussed, and to summarize the main points.

☐ Be prepared for some people to reject the suggestions of others. We all have our own habits and new ideas may take a little time to accept, or may not make sense for our particular ways. Give ideas time to sink in or tell people to use whatever seems right for them.

## Especially For The Places And Things Discussion

☐ To help people talk about places and things that are problems for them, describe your own experiences with difficult environments.

☐ Remind the group that we are not talking about home "decorating," but making changes in the surroundings which offer practical help in our everyday lives.

# Two: Just Before The Meeting

☐ Come ahead of time to arrange the meeting place and make sure you have everything you need. Ask people who arrive early to help you with arrangements. Some things to check:

- Chairs arranged around a table, or in a circle with paths for easy entry and exit
- Good lighting, without glare
- Little or no background noise (close doors and possibly windows)
- Comfortable room temperature and ventilation
- Ample space for movement and display

☐ Ask people to assist you with setting up these items which you need to bring for this meeting:

- This guidebook
- Copies of the Take Home Pages for everyone
- Pens for anyone who might want to take notes
- Big Pad (open to picture 1)
- Table, chair, or easel beside your chair for the Big Pad
- Watch or clock
- Paper for a list of Hints To Try
- Name tags as reminders for new group members

☐ Introduce yourself after everyone has arrived and is settled in. Hand out Take Home Pages so that people can make notes and so they have a personal reminder of the important points of the day.

☐ Go around the group with introductions. Use your personal touch to help put yourself and the group at ease.

☐ Name the topic, "Places And Things: Making Your Personal Environment Work For You." Explain that the meeting will last about an hour and thirty minutes.

☐ Describe the focus of the discussion: "During the next hour and a half we're going to talk about the ways in which we can make the places we live in more comfortable and convenient for ourselves or our family. We are each different in terms of what we like best, or how we like our homes to look. However, today we

are talking about practical ways of organizing things and using our environment, and there is much we can learn from one another."

☐ Encourage group members to participate and share their own experiences and hints. Explain that you are not an authority; each person has learned to be an expert problem solver in one way or another and we want to bring that out today.

☐ Ask your partner or a volunteer from the group to make a list of Hints To Try as good ideas are described during the discussion.

# Three: Getting Started

## Places And Things In My Past

**(15 minutes is suggested for discussing everyone's place history. Read these questions and ask group members to indicate when an example applies to them.)**

Each of us has a different environmental history and it influences what we like and dislike about places. Let's see what different places we've each experienced.

☐ I've lived in:
- Farm, small town, or big city?
- U.S., Canada, or South America?
- Europe or Russia?
- Asia, Africa, or the Middle East?
- Where else?

☐ My favorite places are:
- In the mountains?
- At the beach?
- In my own home or with friends or family?
- In a garden?
- Where else?

☐ The types of places where I've slept are:
- Outside, under the stars, in a tent, or on a boat?
- In a hotel, motel, or lodge?
- In a tall apartment building, a single family house, or farmhouse?
- Where else?

☐ Since I was born, I've lived in:

- The same house?
- Several different places (six or fewer)?
- So many different places it's hard to remember them all?
- Where else?

☐ I especially like the atmosphere of:

- Romantic candlelight or flickering light of a fireplace?
- A storm?
- Early morning dew and birds singing?
- Cool and calm sunset?
- Sharp fluorescent light?
- What else?

**1. Collections to some—clutter to others**

☐ Not everyone organizes their living space in the same way. Some people like to leave their things out so they can be easily seen or found. Others like to put their things away to keep their places uncluttered. The people in this illustration seem to have very different ideas. Do you like your place to be very orderly or pleasingly cluttered?

☐ Here are some more questions about things we like.

☐ My favorite chair is:

- A lounge chair that leans back with a footrest?
- A straight-backed wooden chair, or a rocking chair?
- A wing-back upholstered chair, or a couch?
- A stool that swivels around?
- Sitting up in bed?
- What other kinds?

☐ My favorite tools or objects are:

- Cooking utensils?
- Gardening tools?
- Records or tapes?
- Books?
- Handmade things?
- What else?

☐ Lately, I've begun appreciating the following aspects of environments:

- Lack of steps, or comfortable seating?
- Presence of children, or lively activity?
- Quiet places where I can think?
- The warmth of the sun, or cool breezes?
- What else?

# Four: Guiding The Discussion

☐ Most of us become more sensitive to certain parts of our surroundings as we age. Today we are going to share ways we've found to make our homes more comfortable and convenient for ourselves.

**(15 minutes is suggested for discussing these questions about chairs.)**

☐ Think about chairs, for instance. People are all different sizes and heights, like the people in this picture, and different chairs will suit some better than others. What's your favorite chair like?

- Is it comfortable to be in for long periods?
- Is it easy to get into and out of?
- Does it support your back?

**2. Different chairs suit different people**

☐ It would probably be difficult to dine at a table in the chair being used by the lady with the hat in this picture. And it would be hard to lounge in a straight-back chair like the man is using. Do you have different favorite chairs for different things that you do?

- For dining?
- For writing letters or taking care of finances?
- For watching television?
- For having a conversation with a friend or member of the family?

3. Adjustments can make a chair more comfortable

☐ Have you ever made any adjustments to a chair to make it better for you?

☐ How about by:

- Using footstools?
- Using a pillow?

☐ How is the chair you are sitting in right now?

☐ If it is not comfortable, what could you do?

- Could you adjust that chair?
- Is there another one you could use?

4. One place can serve many purposes

**(15 minutes is recommended for discussing these questions about kitchens.)**

☐ Let's think about kitchens for a few minutes. The kitchen in this picture has lots of things going on:

- Cooking and talking on the phone
- Visiting and playing games
- Notes and reminders by the phone and on the refrigerator

☐ What kinds of things happen in your kitchen?

☐ How about:

- Eating?
- Cooking?
- Talking with friends?
- Paying bills?
- Making grocery lists?

☐ What changes have you made to help do all the things you do in your kitchen?

☐ Does anyone have any other ideas about how to make a kitchen more convenient?

☐ Has anyone tried:

- Rearranging storage space?
- Adding more light?
- Adding a chair or stool?
- Labeling items—especially with "touch" markings like tape?

- Using reminders and memo pads?
- Handy gadgets or utensils?

☐ If we are having trouble with our hands, what could we do?

**Stretch:** Let's take time for a short stretch before we talk about more ways we arrange places to suit ourselves.

**5. Where do you spend most of your time?**

**(20 minutes is recommended for talking about making adjustments to places.)**

☐ Many people have a special spot in their homes where they like to spend a lot of time, and have it arranged so they can do many things there, like the woman in this picture. She can look out the window, sew, and there's a place for her teacup.

☐ Which room do you spend the most time in when you're at home?

☐ What do you do there?

☐ How have you arranged it to make those things more convenient for yourself?

☐ Can you think of any ways in which it is inconvenient to be there?

☐ Can you think of any ways to change it?

Are there places in your house that recently have become impractical or unsafe?

- Bathrooms—tub or shower?
- Steps?
- Hallways?
- High shelves?

☐ What is difficult about them?

☐ What adjustments would help?

☐ Has anyone tried:

- Handrails?
- More lighting?
- Markings on steps?

6. My old room is your workroom now?

☐ Why do you think people sometimes do not make needed or helpful changes in their homes?

- Habit?
- "Set in their ways?"
- Just don't think about it?

☐ Have you ever known people who don't make adjustments in their house because it might displease others, such as:

- Their children?
- Or other family members?

This illustration shows a grown daughter who has mixed feelings about her mother using her old bedroom as a sewing room.

7. Ever need flashlights in restaurants?

**(10 minutes is suggested for discussing places in the community.)**

☐ Let's think about places outside of our homes. Have you ever wished that they handed out flashlights in restaurants, like in this picture?

☐ How could these places be more convenient:

- A concert hall?
- A church or synagogue?
- A big department store?
- A restaurant?
- A bank?
- A movie theater?

# Five: Ending The Discussion

☐ Summarize the main points of the discussion by pointing out that people described different ways to arrange their surroundings to work best for them, and we can make use of each other's practical ideas. Ask everyone to help you review the good ideas they suggested to each other. Make a list of Hints To Try to give group members.

☐ Go around the circle and ask for comments.

☐ Announce the date, time, place, and topic of the next meeting. If your group has an open-ended schedule, decide together if you want to spend another session on this topic before proceeding. If so, describe the ideas for Further Discussions listed under Where Do We Go From Here?, or come up with your own.

☐ Check that everyone has the Take Home Pages, "Seating Tips For Older Adults."

☐ Thank everyone for participating.

# Where Do We Go From Here?

## Further Discussions

Use these suggestions to follow up the first session on "Places And Things," or return to them after the other U.S.E. program discussions on vision, hearing, and memory.

☐ To continue this discussion, read aloud the Introduction to this chapter, "Let's Take A Fresh Look." Discuss any questions that are appropriate for experts to answer (if there happen to be some). Copy and distribute the Background Reading for members who enjoy reading and might be interested in hearing another view on the subject of using places and making them fit **our** needs.

☐ Good Seating. Use the Take Home Pages, "Seating Tips For Older Adults," and discuss the hints and illustrations listed. Ask how chairs and other seats can be adjusted for a better fit. Discuss what can be done about poorly fitting seats in public places like a church or synagogue, senior center, waiting rooms, trains, parks, etc.

☐ Your Environmental Portrait. Distribute copies of Elizabeth Coatsworth Beston's "Personal Geography," which follows this section. After the group has read it, use this article as a spur to group discussion; you may prefer to read all or part of this essay aloud. Some suggestions for discussion questions:

- What are some of your favorite places? Describe the sights, sounds, smells, and textures of those special places that have stayed in your memory.

- Are there certain places that make you very relaxed? The beach? The porch of your house? When you're fishing? Where? When does that place seem especially pleasant to you? At a certain time of day or certain seasons? At holiday times?

- Think about a place that makes you tense or nervous. The dentist's office? A tunnel? Waiting for a bus, plane, or train?

- Is there a particular part of the home you live in now that is your favorite? A special chair? A view out the window? A special time of day, week, or year?

☐ Adjusting To New Places. Any time we move to a new place, we bring with us not only our furniture and our clothes, but also our memories and habits, our likes and dislikes. Discuss the last move that each person in the group has made:

- What do you enjoy most about the new place compared to the place before?
- What is or was the most difficult thing to get used to?
- What ways did you change the new place to make it more convenient when you moved in?
- How did you get to know shopkeepers, neighbors, or other people in your building?

## Resources And References

☐ Send for the pamphlet, "Environmental Modifications for the Visually Impaired: A Handbook," which includes information on building guidelines, orientation aids, suggestions for further reading, and resource organizations. Available (single copy free, charge for bulk orders) from:

- American Foundation for the Blind
  15 West 16th Street
  New York, New York 10011
  (212) 620-2000

# Background Reading

## Personal Geography

By Elizabeth Coatsworth Beston. Excerpted from *Personal Geography: Almost an Autobiography.* Copyright ©1976. Reprinted with the permission of The Stephen Greene Press, Brattleboro, Vermont.

**Boundaries:** My chair is in the southeast corner of the living room flanked by a small bird's-eye maple table to the left and a nest of wicker French stools to the right. The telephone is on the wall at my side, with the especial amplifier to counteract my deafness.

The chair is a small upholstered armchair, the gift of my sister on that last Christmas, when I admired one like it beside her bed. It seems more like a good horse than a chair. It responds to every motion of the rider, it turns to left or right at the first shift of position, it rocks forward or backward as one leans a little this way or that. Wasn't it General Burnside who announced, "My headquarters will be in the saddle"?—to which Lincoln is said to have remarked, "It will be enough if he keeps his hindquarters there"? Anyway, my headquarters are certainly in this chair. My desk is a double piece of cardboard about eighteen inches by twelve, which I keep out of sight beside my chair leaning against the wall when it is not in use. Breakfast and lunch are served here on a tray, and my papers are kept in a basket which we found in the house when we bought it forty-three years ago, one of the

several Indian kitchen baskets that used to be sold from door to door.

Earlier in the year when I came into this room a little after seven o'clock, it was filled with sunlight. Now that the sun has gone so far north the room is in the shadow of the house. The sun does not reach it until early afternoon, although the windows show a sunlit landscape. I should perhaps be out in the open verandah at the back, but writing outdoors takes a certain energy which I no longer have.

My sister used to call this a "busy" room. The carpet is a soft green but the wallpaper, which we put on when we first came here, is one that Henry chose. It came from a factory in Alsace. There are stripes of roses, a wide stripe alternating with a narrow one. The colors have not so much faded as mellowed. The large eighteenth-century armchair is upholstered in chintz. The other chairs and the sofa are in plain colors. Henry bought a what-not to put between the front windows, and the things on it have come from all parts of the world.

When our daughters were setting up their first houses I gave them the Persian rugs I had had in Shipcote, the old house in Hingham, but now I have a few of my sister's. She loved rugs and knew them, which I do not, but there is a beautiful one here at my feet. Our elder daughter, Meg, has sent me from Alaska, where she is now living, many Eskimo soapstone carvings, especially of seals and birds. Our younger daughter, Kate, lives in California within reach of a small shop which handles things from remote parts of South America. These textiles are both beautiful and brilliant and are scattered about the room.

The walls are covered with paintings, the smallest is on glass, framed in a wide border of horn (I cannot image what sort of horn was used). It shows a court lady at her dressing table attended by her maid. I bought it when I was sixteen in the Mexico City of those splendid flamboyant years before the revolutions, and carried it back in my suitcase with a funerary urn (shaped like a god) from Monte Alban, which had not yet been excavated.

I shan't go on, but the room has too many things in it and I couldn't get on without any of them. Each one reminds me of some person or place which I have loved. I am aware of them all, and they are companions sharing the many hours I spend with them. For Mrs. Ball, my housekeeper, leaves the house soon after breakfast and doesn't return until after five in the afternoon, which in winter time is black as midnight. One year the farms on either side of me were empty. I had the acres of pine wood on my west and the pond below me on the east for my only company.

But one morning I woke up thinking, "I will get that poodle puppy." My subconscious had decided during the night, remembering perhaps that Henry had always said, "There should be life along the floor." So I telephoned and bought the puppy, sight unseen and four months old, a handsome black standard puppy whom—yes, whom I named Tamar, after the ancestress who left

Teesdale in the north of England and came to America with four of her married sons and their wives in 1817. "Tammy" we call her, and the house has never been empty since she came. At first she was a great deal of trouble, being independent as a pig on ice, but now she understands and takes part in the daily routine as much as any of us. And she is young, just five in April when I was eighty-three in May, and all the time she grows more loving. But her eyes can still sparkle with mischief and she can still race about the lawn in circles like a mad thing and throw herself bodily into the ice pools which form on the lawn in March. On the coldest day, I have never seen her shiver.

**Second Adolescence:** People used to speak of "a second childhood" where now they say "senile." That stage I have not reached, though I can feel the presence of a shadowy second adolescence. I have more daydreams than for many years I had time for, but usually now they are in the form of memories, not longings. I forget words (the other day I came to a full stop because I had lost "button" from my mind), and generally use a synonym because I know that any word is better than none. I forget names, but I comfort myself with the knowledge that I have always forgotten them. The long-ago day comes back to me when a stranger asked me my name—I was perhaps six—and the sudden question drove it entirely from my mind. I still remember the bewildered feeling of "I don't know who I am"; and perhaps I still feel it.

My body, which was never beautiful or athletic, sufficed me nicely. Now it betrays me continually in small ways. But so far I have been spared arthritis and most of the other painful companions of old age. I am hampered by deafness, in one ear I think, but perhaps in both. (Is that inherited? I can remember Father saying in his forties, "Oh, that won't keep me awake—I'll lie on my good ear.") Whether inherited or not, it hampers me. I have a hearing aid but so far have not learned how to use it properly. Often when I wear it I shout, matching my voice, I suppose, to the voice I hear which is louder than normal.

I cannot walk any distance, and have to beware of losing my balance. Oh, the falls I have had! In the most notable fall, three or four years ago, I broke my right hip, though I didn't know it until finally, ten days later, I had it X-rayed. It healed without an operation after I spent three months in my own bed at home, using a walker when I had to move around. It isn't because of the hip that I stump along, leaning forward to watch where I am going; that's hardening of the arteries and is very limiting, but not at all painful.

At eight-three I drive a car, but I don't like to go for long distances. Four years ago, when my sister Margaret was alive, I thought nothing of driving two hundred miles to stay with her three or four times a year; now I doubt that I could do it. When I no longer have a license, I shall be a toad-in-a-hole indeed.

A generation or two ago there were people who were able to say

from the heart, "It is God's will," and there are still a few such people. I wish that I might be one of them! To me, I appear to be no more in the universal scale than an old leaf still clinging to the bough before dropping and making way for other leaves. But I am lucky so far to have "retained my faculties." I still think; I still write; I still read; I still see my friends—and still have some, heaven be praised! to see.

These remarks are necessarily self-centered, but not by intention. They are written primarily for people of my own age or for those who are approaching it, to discuss honestly the problems which we all face. It is my good fortune to have inherited nothing so dashing as courage, but acceptance of what cannot be changed, and a willingness to enjoy the small gifts which still are so plentiful if one will look for them.

**The Sun Is a Companion:** Each decade that I have lived has had its special joys and difficulties. Now I take a piercing delight when I am alone in the afternoons just looking about the room in which I sit. The farmhouse is very quiet. Probably Tamar is asleep in a patch of sunlight on the floor. But the rooms are silent. No foot falls overhead, there is no stir outside the door.

Tranquility and delight come flooding in with the sunlight. I do not feel this happiness on rainy days. But the sun is a companion. It lies across the furniture I know so well, across the long rose Persian rug that was my sister's, it touches the forsythia and pussy-willow wands in the big bowl on the low wicker table below the west window, it lights up an Eskimo soapstone carving of seals, or burns on a San Blas Indian pillow in one of the chairs. The room is filled with things, too many, but every one of them sings to me, of the giver or of the place from which it has come. The delight that I used to take in traveling has narrowed down to this small focus, but it is still as eager and as pure as when I ranged the world. Shall I ever forget when Henry and I looked up and saw Chichen Itza like a great white dream city in the jungle? Shall I forget how Margaret and I watched lobsters crawling beneath us from a wharf north of the Cabot Trail on Cape Breton? It is a long time since New Englanders have seen lobsters only a few feet from the beach.

I have a thousand memories. I could, I suppose, travel still, but so cautiously and in such a diminished world! I am content to remember larger times. The world in which I live is enough for me. After so many travels, I am home, and my happiness here is no less than it was in foreign lands and my sense of wonder has not dulled with all these years. I am as happy as an old dog stretched out in the sunlight. I remember other times, other places, but (in the sunlight) I am content with here and now.

**Oh, Then I Should Be Very Selective!** A personality to be a work of art must first have quality and second be ruthlessly simplified. You must be able to say of such a one: "The eighteenth

century is his hobby" or "I never see squills without thinking of her." A personality must have recognizably distinct likes and dislikes on almost every side. If a few of these are unexpected, so much the better. The incongruity increases the charm. But in the feast that the world sets before the diner, a choice must have been made, the plates selected, the wines ordered.

In all this I am a lamentable failure. I can't dislike even gladioli whole-heartedly. I do not know who is my favorite author. My reputation as a cat-lover is accidental, for I like cats no more than other animals. I regard all politics with confusion, all theories with suspicion, all arts with interest. Out of this inchoate mass of feelings, only a few things emerge.

My favorite landscape is a long slope of desert circled by mountains in the late afternoon with the smell of sand and sage in the air.

My favorite fruit is raspberries.

I love the lonely ruins of civilizations.

And if I could paint I should paint nothing but pools of water and their reflections. As a writer, of course I write of every sort of thing. But if I were a painter, oh, then I should be very selective! You would come into my studio and find nothing there but studies of still water—not lakes, nor rivers, nor waves, but wet New York pavements mirroring street lamps and the bright inhuman reds and greens of taxicab lights; and the dark grave reflections of grass in the long puddles of country ruts; and rainwater glazed with clouds in the granite hollows of a rock pasture; and the faces of people reflected back, small and intense, from the deep girandole of a well.

**Those Other Lands:** I have traveled in many lands, but the best I have never set foot in. My favorite is the empty country back of India, beyond Mongolia. Once there were large oases there and great cities, and solitary travelers find inscriptions in languages that no one can read. For hundreds of miles along the caravan trail runs the wall that the Chinese once built to guard the Silk Route. The watchtowers were raised in sight of one another's flares, and some of the iron baskets remain in which the beacons were burned and one or two have the charred remains of the last despairing fire which no one was left to respond to. When the trail crosses mountain ranges one finds people with blue eyes, who look like Swiss. They are a native type, not the descendants of Alexander's troops. You can see those too, or people who claim to be them, and the sculpture and frescoes of ruined buildings which are half Greek and half Oriental. All this you can see if you and your camels last out long enough and if your guides do not cut your throat. This world lies behind the Hindu Kush.

Then there is Greenland with its ruins of Viking farmsteads, its icebergs and ice floes—let alone "Greenland's icy mountains"—its deep fiords so green in summer and the mystery of the disappearance of its two Scandinavian colonies, the one to the north gone without sign of violence or any message, taking its

church bells, precious for their iron perhaps, and leaving their flocks and herds still grazing untended. The disappearance of the larger western colony was slower. It lasted probably until after the voyages of Columbus. In the museum of Copenhagen I have seen coarse wool garments dug out of the permafrost near Cape Farewell, the most complete collection of the clothes of Chaucer's time anywhere in the world. And how small they look! They might have been left behind by trolls.

I have admired an iceberg castle in the Straits of Belle Isle, but my Greenland is one of the imagination.

I used to be fascinated by Africa and its people and its arts, but that fascination hasn't stayed the course. With the years I have become merely interested—very much interested, but no longer fascinated. In the Middle East only that part of Turkey with its many volcanic cones in which the pigeons congregate in old painted churches and dwellings carved out of the tufa, holds my fancy.

None of these places have I ever seen and certainly never will see. But I do not wish to see them. They swim in my fancy, often nameless. They are a living part of my thought.

I did not know travel at its dawn, as Marco Polo might have claimed, though he, too, had many predecessors. But it was at **my** dawn, and the early light lies on my memories. We never went on tours, or by schedule: we followed our whims, stayed for a day or a week or a month in one place, or struck off at a tangent when someone told of some wonder. Only once did some pilgrims to the high Buddhist monasteries of the Korean Diamond Mountains look at us in wonder as the first white people they had seen (and examined our clothing almost to our skin) but we traveled at a time when all the ports did not look alike and when people, East and West, wore the clothes their ancestors had worn. I should never feel such joy traveling in today's homogenized world.

But in my armchair, I still travel. I have looked down on the bones of Sir John Franklin's valet who had almost reached the last Arctic encampment in which the remnants of the expedition died, one by one. And why are his bones so especially interesting and touching? Because he carried still in his skeleton hand the brush with which he was accustomed to brush his master's clothes after each day's terrible journey. Even in dying he had not laid down the symbol of his service.

In back-page corners of the newspapers one may still come on little notices that feed the imagination: perhaps a new tribe of Indians has been discovered in its hammocks in the Amazonian jungle; or an (almost) completely primitive group has been found in a cave on one of the Philippine Islands; or a volcanic island has risen from the sea off the coast of Iceland and the scientists are watching to see what will be the first living thing that will adapt itself to its inhospitable lava shores. For myself I choose the paragraph about the Korean sailor rescued at sea from the back of a great turtle. Unnoticed, he had fallen off his vessel, discovered

the sea turtle not far off, and climbed onto its curved and plated shell. His rescuers were prepared to swear that they had found him in the open sea riding the sea turtle. The fact was not considered important enought to warrant details as to how long he had been there, why he had fallen off his ship in the first place, and what, if anything, he had had to eat and drink. Nor was any word vouchsafed as to what had happened to the turtle.

# Take Home Pages

## Seating Tips For Older Adults

People come in all shapes and sizes and so should chairs! An individual chair "fit" is needed for the most comfort. A poorly fitting chair or sofa can cause poor posture and bring about backages, neckaches, tired muscles, swollen feet, or legs and feet that "go to sleep." With a properly fitting chair, such discomforts can be avoided and more energy can be given to paying attention, concentrating, working efficiently, and enjoying what you do. In addition to a good fit for your size, a chair should suit the activity for which it is used:

- For dining and table activities, support for sitting up straight is most comfortable;
- For conversations and waiting, a more relaxed posture is preferred;
- For relaxing and lounging, an even more relaxed position is desirable.

To find a chair that's right for you, use these tips that describe how different parts of a chair should feel for a good fit. The range of measurements preferred by most people for different chair parts is also included.

## The First Test

You should feel most of your body weight resting on your backside, the body's seat (not on the back of thighs or your back). That is the only part of the body built to support your weight while sitting.

## A Seat For Sure Comfort

☐ Seat Height

15″ to 17½″ above the floor is preferred, or so that the seat height allows:

- Knees to bend at a 45 degree angle
- Feet to rest flat on the floor
- Legs and feet to tuck slightly under the seat

☐ Seat Firmness
A cusioned seat is preferred, so that:

- The seat is fairly firm, but allows shifts in position to relieve fatigue
- The front edge behind the knee is firm but fairly soft for comfort with support

☐ Seat Depth
17½″ to 19″ from the front to the back of the seat is preferred, so that your knees extend just beyond the front edge of the seat while the backrest supports your lower back.

☐ Seat Width
A width of 16½″ to 18″ is preferred, so that there is room for movement to relieve muscle tiredness and increase circulation.

☐ Seat Slope
A seat that is ½″ to 1½″ higher at the front than at the back is preferred so that the seat slopes down only slightly, and getting up does not require great effort.

☐ If chairs are too low, too deep, too sloped, or too soft, getting up can be difficult. If too high, uncomfortable pressure is placed on the back of the thighs. Try pillows in appropriate places and footrests as remedies.

## Armrests Are Essential

☐ Armrest Height And Distance Apart
Most people prefer armrests that are 7″ to 7½″ above the seat, with 18″ to 18½″ between armrests, so that arms can easily rest on the armrests while shoulders remain in a level, comfortable position.

☐ Armrest Width
A width of 2″ to 3″ is preferred, so that armrests are at least as wide as your arm, and have a relatively flat surface.

☐ Armrest Length
For leverage when getting up, armrests should extend about 2″ beyond the front edge of the seat.

☐ Armrest Front Edge
For a comfortable hold when pulling forward and pushing up from the seat, the front edge of armrests should be rounded but firm.

☐ The Elbow Test For Comfort
You should be able to rest your elbows on the table or desk top without raising or lowering your arms, and armrests should fit underneath the table top.

☐ Armrests are essential props while working and for support when sitting down and getting up. Leaning forward or to the side are signals that armrests may be too low or too far apart—try pillows as props. If shoulders feel hunched up, armrests are probably too high or too close together.

## Backrests That Benefit Posture

☐ Backrest Shape And Height

A height of 13½″ to 17″ or more is preferred, so that the backrest provides support for your lower back and between your shoulder blades. The backrest should curve slightly to fit around your back.

☐ Backrest Slope

For sitting down and rising with ease, backrests should slant back only slightly.

☐ If too much weight is placed on your back, use firm pillows to provide support for sitting up straighter.

## Features For Safety

☐ Chair Legs

Legs of chairs and other furniture, too:

- Should be positioned out of the way, under the seat, tabletop, etc.
- Should contrast in color with the floor for better visibility

☐ Tie Rails

For better balance and leverage when rising, tie rails of chairs should be positioned so that your feet can fit slightly under the seat. Look for tie rails that are:

- At least 5″ above the floor
- Located under the center of the seat

☐ A Test For Steadiness

Stand in front of a chair and place your weight on one armrest. A well-balanced chair will not tip.

# Chapter Three NEAR AND FAR VISION

## Making Close Work And The Visual Surroundings Easier To Use

# Introduction

## Vision And The Environment

Dialing the telephone. Reading. Sewing. Playing cards. Cooking. Shopping. Paying bills. Shaving. All of these are examples of daily activities that typically require the use of eyes and hands in close work. But in later years, we may find that it is not as easy as it once was to use eyes comfortably and efficiently. Sometimes, out of frustration, discomfort, or lack of confidence in dealing with detailed activities, people may even give up doing enjoyable things. Many times, however, small adjustments to the surroundings can make up for vision changes or impairments and permit us to manage our lives efficiently, carry on favorite activities, and have more time with others.

As the years go by, almost everyone experiences changes in vision to some degree. Some changes are the result of such eye diseases as cataracts, diabetes, or glaucoma, which are often preventable or treatable.

Other changes in eyesight naturally accompany growing older. Like changes in hair or skin, these changes take place gradually and vary from person to person. As the lens of the eye thickens and yellows, less light passes through. Light entering the eye is scattered about, rather than focused on one area, making the eye more sensitive to glare. Just as other muscles lose some strength and speed with age, the muscles of the eye and surrounding areas weaken, work more slowly, and become less flexible.

All these changes combined may affect many routine actions, from tying shoes or setting the dials on the stove, to shopping for groceries, gardening, watching a play, or driving a car.

Around the age of 40, we may discover that it's no longer possible to hold the newspaper far enough away to read it. Farsightedness, technically called presbyopia, occurs when the eye can no longer focus clearly at close range. Shifting the focus of the eye also becomes more troublesome: If we've been looking across the room, we might miss something "right under our noses." Or while looking straight ahead, we might not catch a movement that occurs "out of the corner of our eyes."

When eyesight becomes less sharp, it is harder to read small print or pick out tiny details. Colors may appear faded and similar colors are usually more difficult to tell apart, especially greens, blues, and purples. Matching socks or yarns can become a real challenge!

Night vision, once as keen as a cat's, may be greatly reduced. It might not seem as secure to walk down steps in the dark. Bright light can be equally bothersome. Sparkling chandeliers, once entrancing, are now irritating; reflected light from shiny floors can be positively dazzling and may even look treacherously like water or ice. It takes eyes longer to adjust to abrupt changes in light, whether sudden flashes of bright headlights on a dark, wet night or the fuzzy darkness of a movie theatre compared to the well-lit

popcorn stand in the lobby. A brightly lit floor area beside a darker spot may appear to be a step or even an object.

Because it takes more effort to use the eyes and surrounding muscles, some people find their eyes become tired or irritated more often. Others may suffer from a headache or find it more difficult to pay attention. Everyone experiences eye strain at times, under conditions that vary from individual to individual. Visual fatigue or eye strain will not diminish vision, but if the cause is not avoided, discomfort may be experienced more often. Although changes in eyesight affect both near and far vision, eye strain is most noticeable when doing something close at hand because that's when our eyes are working the hardest. When eyes are working hard, we use up a lot of energy as well.

All too often people believe that visual fatigue or discomfort means they should "save" their vision by not using their eyes so much. But eye doctors and other vision specialists tell us that we should never stop doing any activity because of visual difficulty or discomfort without first determining the cause.

Since some changes in vision result from eye diseases, it is important to see an eye doctor. If vision changes are great, low vision services may be needed. Low vision services are methods of making the best possible use of remaining vision, whether sight has been limited by eye disease, injury, or aging changes. (For more information see "Low Vision" in Background Reading on page 72).

Besides taking care of the health of eyes, we can take care of how and where they are used. By paying particular attention to the surroundings, we can help our eyes to work and feel better. There are four important aspects of the visual environment that we can control:

- Light—How much and what kinds of light are we using?
- Contrast—Is there a helpful difference in lightness and darkness between an object and its background?
- Time—Are we taking time for a break to rest eyes and prevent strain?
- Size—Are we using large enough objects?

Of the conditions that affect vision, only one, the eyes, depends on the body's physical state. The others involve our personal environment—the places and things around us, and how we use them. We can make changes in most of these conditions that will enable us to see better, to do things more efficiently, and to work for longer periods with less fatigue or strain.

Specific guidelines for adjusting light, contrast, time, and size to make the best use of vision are described below. Examples of these are provided on the Big Pad and in this chapter to serve as reminders as the discussion goes along.

## Shed Good Light On The Subject

**Use Enough Light:** Most older people need two to three times as much light as twenty-year-olds. When doing detailed tasks, 200 watts is recommended. High intensity or incandescent-fluorescent lamps can be particularly helpful when a great deal of concentrated light is needed, but avoid "tensor" or tiny hot lamps. Adequate light is equally important for viewing farther away, such as when watching a speaker at a meeting or distinguishing the edges of stairs.

**Control Glare:** Glare is caused by looking at a light that is very bright compared to the area around it. That's why it is uncomfortable to watch TV in a dark room or look at someone sitting in front of a sunny window. Sources of glare include bare light bulbs, very bright sunlight, and light reflected from shiny floors, glass tabletops, or even glossy magazine pages. To control glare, shade light from bulbs and windows and cover shiny surfaces.

**Avoid Sudden Changes From Bright To Dim Light:** Since it may now take as long as a minute or two to adjust to different light levels, leaving on small lamps or night-lights makes it safer and easier to enter a hallway or bathroom. Wearing sunglasses or a hat with a brim can make us more sure of our footing when going from indoors into bright sunlight, or the reverse.

## Contrast For Clarity

**Use A Contrasting Background:** The more light-dark contrast there is between an object and its background, the more clearly it can be seen, whether nearby or far away. Use dark backgrounds for light objects and vice versa. Hemming a dark skirt is less tedious if it is placed over a light-colored sheet. And we are less likely to trip over a chair leg if it contrasts with the floor.

**Avoid Patterned Backgrounds:** Busy prints, patterns and shadows "hide" objects we are trying to see.

**Use "Touch" Contrasts:** With differences that can be both seen and felt, we can tell things apart more quickly and accurately. Items or utensils of different sizes, shapes, or textures can reduce confusion. A piece of tape, a dot of glue, or a plastic band makes it easier to select the house key from others on a key ring. (More ideas about using contrast are described in the Background Reading, "Making Things Easier To See," on page 67).

## Take Time For A Break

Taking time for a break from any activity that demands concentration can prevent fatigue or relieve strain. A brief rest revitalizes us to continue with the task at hand.

**Take Time To Rest The Eyes:** Exercises that relax the eyes and surrounding muscles or that stimulate circulation are especially refreshing. (Instructions for some eye-resting techniques are included in "Avoiding Eye Strain" on page 70).

**Take Time To Check For Good Seating And Proper Posture:** Chairs that are too low, too deep, or otherwise not a good "fit" can cause poor posture and bring about backaches, neckaches, muscle fatigue, swollen feet, or legs and feet that "go to sleep." It is especially important when doing demanding work to have a comfortable chair that provides proper support and allow us to pay attention and enjoy what we are doing. People come in all shapes and sizes and need an individualized fit. For a good fit, most of the body weight should be felt on the body's seat, not on the back or thighs. A good chair or sofa also:

- Allows feet to rest flat on the floor
- Has arms for support when working
- Is steady and easy to get into and out of
- Fits comfortably with the desk or table being used

For more about good seating, review the Take Home Pages, "Seating Tips For Older Adults" in the Places And Things chapter.

## Find The Size That Fits

**Use Larger Sizes:** Many household articles used in close work, from telephone dials to playing cards, are available in larger sizes from local stores or special catalogs. (Sources for a variety of large print reading materials are listed on page 65.) This booklet is printed in the type size (12 point) and style (serif or Roman) that most older people find easiest to read. For posters or signs, however, a "straight" or plain style of type (sans serif or Gothic) is preferred, like the type used on the U.S.E. program poster. At a distance, larger lettering on signs and clocks can be seen more distinctly.

**Bring Objects Closer:** Some people are afraid that bringing things close to their eyes is harmful. Close viewing in itself will not damage eyes, but it may indicate a change in vision or poor lighting conditions in the surroundings. If eyes and glasses have been checked, it's fine to hold things as close as necessary. Props like bookstands, pillows, or lap desks can make work more convenient and prevent bending over.

**Use Magnifiers:** With the approval of vision specialists, low-powered hand-held or stand magnifiers can be helpful for detailed work like reading or sewing. More powerful magnifiers, as well as other aids, can be prescribed by eye doctors for people with serious low vision problems. Often, as the power of the magnifier is increased, more light is needed. *Products for People With Vision Problems*, a free catalog of aids and appliances, is available from the American Foundation for the Blind.

**Light. Contrast. Time. Size.** During the session, encourage the group to contribute hints in each of these four areas. Because of the number of ideas to be covered, this topic discussion is divided into two parts for two group meetings. Part I describes how good

lighting and contrast can improve visibility, both nearby and far away. Part II covers how to make good use of time with visual breaks, eye-resting, proper posture and seating that fits, as well as ways to adjust sizes for comfortable viewing.

## PART I: LIGHTING AND CONTRAST

# One: To Keep In Mind

☐ For a discussion totaling one hour and thirty minutes, plan approximately:

- 15 minutes for introductions and Getting Started
- 1 hour for Guiding The Discussion
- 15 minutes for Ending The Discussion

Additional time breakdowns are suggested in the guide. Also take time for a stretch break about midway through the meeting as noted.

☐ Make sure each person gets to respond to a question during Getting Started. This may mean asking some people direct questions, and asking others to hold back.

☐ Listen for the words people use to describe the surroundings and use their words when asking questions or encouraging discussion.

☐ As you discuss each topic during the session:

- Refer to and repeat examples people give during Getting Started to illustrate points;
- Encourage people to come up with ideas for other ways to make adjustments that may not have been mentioned;
- Give people a chance to come up with their own responses before using examples or tips given in the chapter or shown on the Big Pad;
- Use the Big Pad as a visual reminder of the topic being discussed, and to summarize the main points.

☐ Be prepared for some people to reject suggestions of others. We all have our own habits and new ideas may take a little time to accept, or may not make sense for our particular ways. Give ideas time to sink in or tell people to use whatever seems right for them.

## Especially For The Vision Discussion

☐ Because this topic includes information and terms that may be new to many people, you may be asked technical questions during this session more than in others. Don't feel that you should know the answer to every question. Try saying something like, "That sounds like something a doctor (or other expert) should answer."

☐ Make a list of any questions that come up which are appropriate for experts to answer.

☐ To help people talk about their problems with vision, describe your own experiences about when and where seeing is difficult.

☐ Use props to illustrate points as they come up. Here are some suggestions for different parts of the discussion:

- Shed Enough Light On The Subject—Bring in a lamp and different bulbs, such as a 3-way bulb and a fluorescent bulb that fits into a regular socket. You may be able to get a local hardware store to donate bulbs and socket adapters for the group.

- Contrast For Clarity—Have some everyday items like needle and thread to place on different colors of cloth. Get a book of swatches from a fabric, rug, or upholstery store. Use them to illustrate contrast in both color and texture. Display medicine bottles with different shapes, caps, texture markings, or labels. Demonstrate making "touch" markings with dots of glue.

- Light And Contrast For Stairs—Check the hardware store for rough-textured tape that can be applied to edges of steps for visual and tactile contrast and to help prevent slips.

- Avoid Sudden Changes In Light—Show an easy-to-install dimmer switch, and a night light with a white shade to decrease glare.

# Two: Just Before The Meeting

☐ Come ahead of time to arrange the meeting place and make sure you have everything you need. Ask people who arrive early to help you with arrangements. Some things to check:

- Chairs arranged around a table, or in a circle with paths for easy entry and exit
- Good lighting, without glare
- Little or no background noise (close doors and possibly windows)
- Comfortable room temperature and ventilation
- Ample space for movement and display

☐ Ask people to assist you with setting up these items which you need to bring for this meeting:

- This guidebook
- Copies of the Take Home Pages for everyone
- Pens for anyone who might want to take notes
- Big Pad (open to Picture 8)
- Table, chair, or easel beside your chair for the Big Pad
- Watch or clock

- Paper for a list of Hints To Try
- Name tags as reminders for new group members
- Props that you bring in (suggestions are provided under To Keep In Mind).

☐ Introduce yourself after everyone has arrived and is settled in. Hand out Take Home Pages so that people can make notes and so they have a personal reminder of the important points of the day.

☐ Go around the group with introductions. Use your personal touch to help put yourself and the group at ease.

☐ Name the topic, "Near And Far Vision: Making Close Work And The Visual Surroundings Easier To Use." Explain that the meeting will last about an hour and thirty minutes.

☐ Describe the focus of the discussion: "During the next hour and a half we're going to talk about some ways to make it easier to read, watch TV, pay bills or otherwise use our eyes for looking at things that are nearby or far away. Because we each have different ways of doing things, we can learn some practical hints from each other about how to use vision more comfortably and efficiently."

☐ Encourage group members to participate and share their own experiences and hints. Explain that you are not an authority; each person has learned to be an expert problem-solver in one way or another and we want to bring that out today.

☐ Ask your partner or a volunteer from the group to make a list of Hints To Try as good ideas are described during the discussion.

# Three: Getting Started

## My Detail Work. . .

**(15 minutes is suggested for finding out how everyone uses vision more comfortably. Encourage everyone to participate. Give people a chance to come up with their own examples before using a few of those listed below and shown on the Big Pad.**

☐ What are some activities you do that require close attention or use of your eyes?

☐ Does anyone:
- Read?
- Play cards or table games?
- Watch TV?
- Do needlework or knit?

8. My detail work

- Play a musical instrument, like the gentleman in the illustration?
- Cook, measure, read recipes?
- Play Bingo?
- Do woodworking or build models?
- Pay bills?
- Write letters, like the woman at her desk in this picture?
- Play shuffleboard or horseshoes?
- Drive a car?
- Shop for groceries?

☐ Do you have a particular place where you like to do this activity?

**(Encourage comments about the surroundings).**

☐ What about that **place** makes it good to work there?

- What is the **lighting** like?
- Do you work at a **table** or **desk**?
- Is the **chair** comfortable?

☐ Do your eyes sometimes feel tired or strained while you're doing this activity?

☐ What are some ways you have found to make detailed work more efficient and less tiring?

**(Point out the adjustments to lighting, contrast, size, or time that people describe.)**

# Four: Guiding The Discussion

☐ You have been naming examples of the four things that are important for efficient and comfortable use of vision—for both near and far. These four are:

- Lighting
- Contrast
- Size
- Time

USE GOOD:

1. LIGHTING
2. CONTRAST
3. SIZE
4. TIME

**9. Some important points to consider**

☐ Today we are going to talk about the first two: Lighting and Contrast. We will talk about Size and Time during the next meeting. So if someone brings up an interesting point that will be covered next time, I'll ask you to please help me remember it then.

**10. Shed enough light on the subject**

**(12 minutes is recommended for discussing the importance of using enough light.)**

☐ Some of you mentioned lighting as important. **(Give names and repeat examples.)**

☐ How much light do you use for close-up work?

☐ Most people need more light now than they used to—200 watts for detailed activities is recommended, along with other light throughout the room, like this gentleman in the illustration is using. He has a lamp beside his hobby **and** light from a ceiling fixture.

**(People need different amounts of light. Some may need more, others less than the recommended amount.)**

☐ Have you checked your lighting lately to see if more would be better?

☐ How could you provide more light where you need it?

☐ Tips:

- Increase wattage if lamp will accept more
- Move lamps closer to work
- Add another lamp

**(Show props)**

**11. Beware of glare—control it**

**(12 minutes is suggested for discussing measures for controlling glare. Because people may not be alert to the many sources of glare, point out the trouble spots listed below which people may not recognize as "glare" problems.)**

☐ Another part of good lighting is controlling glare. When does glare bother you?

- When working or playing cards on a shiny table top, like this couple?
- If a light bulb is peeking out beneath a shade?
- When looking at someone or something in front of a bright light or window?
- From a bare bulb?
- From a shiny floor?

☐ What could you do to control glare in these situations?

☐ The woman in this illustration is adjusting the blinds to direct the light up instead of down. Light still comes in but doesn't cause glare.

☐ Other Tips:

- Cover all bare bulbs
- Cover or remove shiny surfaces—the card-playing couple could put a cloth over their shiny table, too
- Move away from glary areas

**(10 minutes is recommended for talking about contrasts that make things easier to see.)**

☐ We can see things better if we make them stand out by contrasting light and dark tones. **(Name someone who gave this example.)**

☐ What are some other examples of using light-dark contrast to make close work easier to see?

☐ Has anyone ever tried:

- Using a white background when threading a needle?
- Playing cards or doing light-colored hobbies on a dark table or tablecloth?
- Using dark needles with light yarns, and the reverse?

**(Show props)**

12. Contrast for clarity

☐ Have you ever been bothered by unhelpful contrasts that hide what you're trying to see, like the patterned tablecloth in this picture? Can you find the book and the pair of glasses on the table?

☐ What can we do about:

- Busy prints and patterns?
- Shadows?

☐ What else can we use, besides light-dark contrasts, to make things stand out?

- Different shapes?
- Different sizes?
- Different textures?

☐ It's easy to confuse things and pick up the wrong item if several are all the same shape and size, like the bottles on the bottom shelf in the picture. Objects that look and feel different from each other are easier to tell apart.

☐ How else can size, shape, and touch contrasts be helpful?

**(Show props)**

☐ **Summary:** We can avoid camouflaging the things we need to tell apart by using contrasts in:

- Light and Dark
- Shapes
- Sizes
- Textures

**Stretch:** Let's take time for a short stretch break before we go on to talk about good lighting and contrast for looking at a distance.

**(15 minutes is suggested for discussing stairways and watching speakers.)**

☐ What are good arrangements of lighting and contrast when we're looking farther away, like when walking on a stairway?

☐ Tip—the same guidelines apply:

- Use enough light
- Control glare
- Contrast light-dark, shapes, sizes, and textures, like dark edges on light steps as those shown in the illustration
- No confusing shadows or patterns on stairs

13. Good lighting and contrast for stairs

☐ In this picture there are light switches at both the top and bottom of the stairs, handrails that contrast with the walls, and the light fixture is covered to decrease glare.

☐ What about lighting and contrast for situations like today, when talking to people in a group?

☐ Tip: Good light on speaker and displays, no light behind them.

☐ What about the light in this room? Is there enough?

☐ Are there any areas of glare?

**(Demonstrate with lights in the meeting room. Open blinds or curtains to illustrate glare, turn off background or close-up lighting for comparison.)**

14. Avoid sudden changes in light

**(10 minutes is suggested for discussing ways to avoid sudden changes in light.)**

☐ While walking about and looking farther away, the eyes have to adapt to different amounts of light. Have you noticed that it takes longer to adjust to sudden changes from bright to dim light, or the reverse?

☐ When does this happen?

☐ What have you done to avoid sudden changes?

☐ This fellow in the picture has a small lamp near the doorway to turn on. What else would help when going from bright to dim areas indoors?

☐ Tips:

- Night lights
- 3-way bulbs or dimmer switches can be turned up as eyes adjust

☐ How about when we're outdoors?

☐ Tips:

- Sunglasses
- Brimmed hats and caps

☐ It's important to be patient about giving our eyes time to adjust—it may take at least a minute or two. In the few minutes when vision is poor while eyes are adjusting, falls can easily occur due to unsteadiness or tripping over an unseen obstacle or step.

☐ **Summary:** So to improve visibility at a distance, follow the same guidelines for good light and good contrast, and avoid sudden changes from bright to dim light.

## Five: Ending The Discussion

☐ Summarize the main points of the discussion by reviewing the captions on the Big Pad. Ask everyone to help you review the good ideas they suggested to each other. Make a list of these Hints To Try to give group members.

☐ Explain that the topic "Near And Far Vision" will continue at the next meeting, with a discussion about ways to adjust size, make good use of time, and relieve eye strain.

☐ Go around the circle and ask for comments.

☐ Announce the date, time, and place of the next meeting.

☐ Check that everyone has the Take Home Pages, "Lighting Tips for Older Adults."

☐ Thank everyone for participating.

# PART II. TIME AND SIZE

## Six: To Keep In Mind

☐ Before the discussion, review the eye-resting exercises on page 70 of this chapter and the Take Home Pages, "Seating Tips For Older Adults," from the "Places And Things" chapter.

☐ Refer to Just Before The Meeting and prepare as you did for Part I of this discussion.

☐ Have some packaged wet towels available, since some people may be reluctant to put their hands near their eyes unless they wash their hands first.

☐ Make a list of any questions that come up which are appropriate for experts to answer.

☐ Use props to illustrate points about adjusting size as they are brought up for discussion.

- Use larger sizes—large number telephone dial, playing cards, large print magazine or book.
- Bring things closer—adjustable book holder or lap desk.
- Use magnifiers—hand-held magnifying glass, stand magnifier, a lighted magnifier, or one that hangs around the neck.

# Seven: Getting Started

## I Know My Eyes Are Tired When. . .

**(15 minutes is recommended for reviewing and discussing everyone's symptoms. Encourage everyone to participate. Review points from the first part of this discussion using the Big Pad captions.)**

☐ Just a quick review of how good lighting and contrast can help your eyes work better and feel better for close work and looking at a distance.

☐ Today we are going to discuss the other two factors important for comfortable and efficient use of vision—Time and Size.

☐ How do **you** know when your eyes are tired?

**(Give everyone a chance to respond before asking about some of the symptoms listed.)**

☐ There are many different symptoms of eye strain:

- Blurry vision
- Pain in the eyes
- Tears or burning
- Headache
- Backache
- Neckache
- Pain in the forehead
- Inability to concentrate
- Short attention span

# Eight: Guiding The Discussion

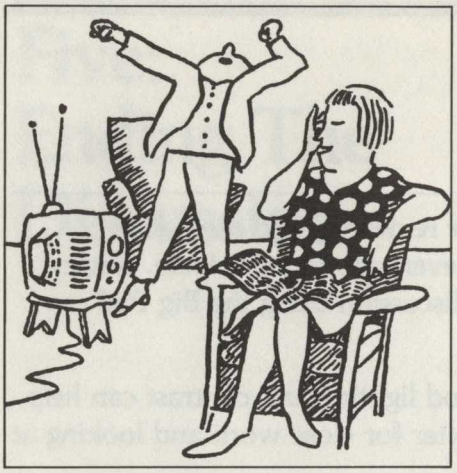
**(20 minutes is suggested for trying some eye-resting techniques.)**

☐ At the beginning of the last meeting, some of you mentioned you found using your vision less tiring by taking time for a break. **(Ask people to repeat examples.)**

☐ Have you ever taken a break before your eyes started to bother you?

☐ What happened? An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure!

☐ What are some other ways to rest your eyes?



15. Take time for a break

☐ The man in this picture is taking a stretch from watching TV. And the woman has put aside her newspaper to do an eye-resting technique. Have you ever tried an eye massage?

**(Turn to page 71 for instructions. Do others if time permits.)**

**(20 minutes is recommended for exploring good posture, chairs, and the elbow test. Because they are especially important for close work, review the following points from the Take Home Pages, "Seating Tips For Older Adults" from the "Places And Things" chapter.**

16. Check your posture, chair, and desk

☐ Because a body is one whole connected system, if we don't use good posture, eyes may tire more quickly. What ways have you found to encourage good posture when you're doing close-up work?

☐ A chair that "fits," like the one the person is using in the picture, helps make good posture easier. Does the chair you are sitting in now pass this checklist for a chair that fits?

- You feel most of your weight on your body's seat, not on your thighs or back
- Your feet reach the floor
- Chair has armrests for support
- Chair is easy to get into and out of

☐ Some of you mentioned working at a table. Have you ever tried the "elbow test" for comfort? You should be able to rest your elbows on the table without leaning over or raising your arms.

☐ Does the table we're sitting at pass the test for you?

☐ Summary: Remember, you deserve a time for a break. Take time to:

- Rest your eyes
- Do eye exercises
- Check your posture
- Check your chair and table

**Stretch:** Let's take time for the break that we deserve right now. Try an eye-resting method if you like.

17. Find the size that fits

**(20 minutes is suggested for discussing these three ways to adjust size.)**

☐ Some of you also mentioned ways you have adjusted sizes to make activities more comfortable. **(Ask people to review examples.)**

☐ What are some other ways size can be adjusted?

☐ Does anyone use other larger-sized items? What?

☐ Have you checked with the phone company for a large, contrasting dial like the one shown in the picture? **(Show props.)**

☐ Has anyone found that increasing size by bringing things closer is helpful? **(Reassure the group that holding objects close is not harmful as long as eyes and glasses have been checked.)**

☐ How have you made holding things closer comfortable and convenient?

☐ This person is using a lap desk to make close viewing easier.

☐ **Tips—other props:**

- Pillows
- Bookstands
- Chair armrests

**(Show props)**

☐ Has anyone found magnifiers useful?

☐ There are several other types of magnifiers in addition to the hand-held kind being used by the woman in this picture.

**(Show props.)**

☐ **Summary:** So, it's important to "find the size that fits" by:

- Using larger items
- Bringing things closer
- Using magnifiers

# Nine: Ending The Discussion

☐ Summarize the points for both discussions of Near And Far Vision by reviewing the captions on the Big Pad. Ask everyone to help you review the good ideas they suggested to each other. Make a list of these Hints To Try to give group members.

☐ Go around the circle and ask for comments.

☐ Announce the date, time, place, and topic of the next meeting. If your group has an open-ended schedule, decide together if you want to spend another session on this topic before proceeding. If so, describe the ideas for Further Discussions listed under Where Do We Go From Here?, or come up with your own.

☐ Check that everyone has the Take Home Page, "Making Things Easier To See And Do."

☐ If the Take Home Pages will be used for another meeting, ask everyone what activity he or she will use and have each person write it on these pages. Ask if everyone will be able to fill them out. If not, find out why, and with the group, try to figure out a solution to the difficulty.

For example, could they do part of it, even if they don't have time to do it all? Could someone help them? Who? Could they do it if they remembered? What would help remind them? Can someone in the group call everyone else? Would signs help?

☐ Thank everyone for participating.

# Additional Suggestions

If members of the group have serious vision or hearing impairments, this session can be of particular value. Before the discussion, read the entire chapter to become familiar with the information presented and how to encourage participants to share tips and solve problems together. Also review the general communication guidelines for visually and hearing impaired groups provided in Chapter 1.

## Visually Impaired Persons

☐ Background Reading articles included with this package are especially relevant for these groups.

☐ Visually impaired persons with usable vision can benefit from all parts of these discussions. In addition to Lighting, Contrast, Size, and Time, introduce the concept of "organization" as a means of improving efficiency. Ask participants how they arrange and organize things around them to do particular activites. Note that keeping items (1) within reach, (2) in a consistent order, and (3) stored where they are used all increase the ease of doing a task.

☐ Discuss "organizers" for medicines, kitchen or desk drawers, and financial records that can be bought or easily arranged. See Further Discussions and Resources And References under Where Do We Go From Here? for more information on aids and appliances.

☐ Focus the discussion on tips for the following list of challenging tasks:

- Close work—reading; making lists; tending to finances; telephoning and taking messages; using control dials (thermostat, radiator, etc.); grooming; threading needles and sewing; tying and untying bows, ties, and knots; smoking; conversations; matching clothing.

- Medium distances—home repairs; gardening; keeping track of time; locking and unlocking doors and windows; locating dropped objects; playing table games; watching TV; laundry; housekeeping; shopping.

- Distance vision—walking and crossing streets; locating and becoming oriented to places; avoiding hazards; recognizing landmarks.

☐ Contact an area rehabilitation center for the blind and ask them to provide assistance or suggest resource people as needed for any of the tasks listed above.

☐ Ask in what ways group members have been assertive about their visual needs. How can difficult situations be handled? Check popular books on assertiveness for suggestions.

☐ Discuss ways to live in the most independent residence possible.

☐ Ask for tips on mobility. Invite both a mobility instructor and a physical therapist to a meeting.

☐ Discuss ways of keeping in touch with sighted friends and family members.

## Hearing Impaired Persons

Vision is often used to compensate for loss of hearing. Review these points from the Hearing And Understanding discussion, and discuss how lighting, contrast, time, and size can help.

☐ Point out that conversation can be considered a close work activity. Ask if anyone has ever heard someone say, "Wait a minute. Let me get my glasses and turn on the light so I can hear you better." Conversation depends on vision more than we realize. We look at faces, see expressions and gestures, and read lips. Have you ever noticed that it's hard to hear and understand someone who has a big mustache? We check what our ears hear with what our eyes see. Ask the group how light and contrast can affect conversational situations.

☐ Emphasize the need to take time for breaks because of the additional strain on sight, as well as the effort to hear. Ask how group members know when they need a hearing break. What are good ways to let others know?

☐ Ask where speakers should be located to be seen and heard best and review ways to let them know.

☐ Discuss how to understand and keep track of telephone messages when hearing and vision are impaired.

# Where Do We Go From Here?

## Further Discussions

☐ Ask people to bring back their Take Home Pages to go over with the group. Ask for suggestions from the group about other adjustments that could be made to ease the task that each person describes. Try to work out together any problems related to how to make adjustments, or have them made by others.

☐ Do more of the eye-resting exercises described on page 71.

☐ Have another discussion about lighting, using the Take Home Pages, "Lighting Tips For Older Adults," and the materials listed under Resources And References. Discuss hints for improving lighting in various rooms, especially hallways, bathrooms, kitchens, and by the telephone or beside the bed. Have someone from a local hardware store or lighting store demonstrate cost- and energy-saving bulbs and equipment, and how to install a dimmer switch.

☐ Use the *Products For People With Vision Problems* catalog from the American Foundation for the Blind for illustrations of magnifying aids and ask what other large-size items the group has discovered. You may be able to obtain or borrow large-size or other vision products from a local library, public school, low vision clinic, vision care professional, or rehabilitation center for the blind.

☐ For Review And More Information. During a meeting, read aloud the Introduction to this chapter, "Vision And The Environment." Discuss questions or responses that people have. Make a list of any questions that are appropriate for experts, and with the group figure out where to go for answers. If appropriate, suggest the books, articles, and organizations listed under Resources And References. Also copy and distribute the Background Reading articles for group members interested in more information.

☐ Discuss places in the community, such as banks, restaurants, grocery stores, libraries, senior centers, and churches, where it is necessary to look at things close up and farther away. Discuss what improvements are needed and how they might be made. Make a list of good examples and figure out why they work, such as restaurants with enough light to read the menu and walk around safely; and banks with good lighting and a place to sit for filling out forms.

☐ Obtain copies of the materals listed in Resources And References (single copies usually free, more at a small cost).

Distribute them to the group and use for the basis of a discussion. Make at least one copy of each available in a central location, such as a local library or senior center reading room.

☐ Suggest that interested persons team up to find out where large type reading materials, recorded materials, and vision aids and appliances are available in your area. Contact a local library, agency on aging or blindness, or the sources below. Set aside meeting time to exchange and compile information.

☐ For more information about recorded and braille editions of books and periodicals and the name and address of the regional library serving your area, contact:

- Division for the Blind and Physically Handicapped
  Library of Congress
  1219 Taylor Street, N.W.
  Washington, D.C. 20542

☐ All currently available large type books are listed in the following publication:

- Large Type Books In Print
  R. R. Bowker Co.
  1180 Avenue of the Americas
  New York, New York 10036

## Resources And References

☐ Lighting. Check with your local library, or send for the books and pamphlets below for more ideas about how to provide good lighting. Keep in mind that general lighting guides do not usually take into account the increased amounts of light needed as we grow older. Recommended amounts are typically based on the needs of 20-year-olds with 20/20 vision and should be doubled or tripled for people 60 and over. Also, decorative lighting is sometimes emphasized more than practical lighting which becomes more important to comfort, efficiency and safety.

☐ The following and other home lighting pamphlets are available free from:

Residential Lighting Division
General Electric Company
Nela Park
Cleveland, Ohio 44112

- *The Light Book: How To Be At Home With Lighting,* by G.E. Residential Lighting Specialists.
- *Bulb Selector Guide for Home Lighting.*
- *14 Electricity-Saving Home Lighting Tips.*
- For answers to specific questions or for the name of a lighting representative in your area, contact Nancy Evans Christensen, G.E. Residential Lighting Specialist, at the same address as above.

Some other "how-to" books on home lighting:

- *Lighting Your Home: A Practical Guide*, by Mary Gilliat and Douglas Baker, New York: Pantheon Books, 1979.

- *The House Book*, by Terence Conran, London: Mitchell Beazley Publishers, Ltd., 1974.

☐ Contact these organizations for more information about aging and visual impairment, blindness and low vision services:

- American Foundation For The Blind
  15 West 16th Street
  New York, New York 10011
  (212) 620-2077

  Send for a free catalog describing free and priced publications available from AFB. Contact the Foundation's M.C. Migel Memorial Library for bibliographies on such subjects as low vision aids and services, and for a reprint of "Color Contrast As An Aid For Visually Impaired Persons," by Vincent J. Sicurella, *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness*, June 1977.

- Vision Foundation, Inc.
  770 Centre Street
  Newton, Massachusetts 02158
  (617) 965-5877
  Mass. toll free number
  1-800-852-3029

  Among other services, a buddy phone system and self-help groups for older visually impaired adults are sponsored. Resources offered are compiled in *Coping With Sight Loss: The Vision Resource Book* (also available in cassette tape).

- Retinitis Pigmentosa Foundation
  8331 Mindale Circle
  Baltimore, Maryland 21207
  (301) 655-1011

  Some chapters sponsor self-help groups in addition to newsletters and other services. Contact your local chapter.

- American Optometric Association
  243 North Lindbergh Boulevard
  St. Louis, Missouri 63141

  Send for free catalog of publications, including pamphlets on vision and aging, low vision, driving tips for older adults and more.

- National Society to Prevent Blindness
  79 Madison Avenue
  New York, New York 10016

  Send for free catalog of publications, including pamphlets about vision and aging, TV and your eyes and more.

- Your local or state agency on aging.

☐ For information related to aging and home adjustment how-to's, contact your state or county Cooperative Extension Agency Office.

# Background Reading

## Making Things Easier To See

By Jessica Finch. Reprinted with permission from the author and previous publishers: British Retinitis Pigmentosa Society, in *RP Newsletter*, No. 16; Royal National Institute for the Blind, in *The New Beacon*, September, 1980.

The following thoughts and queries were prompted by a face-lift given to my kitchen a few years ago. Why should having the dark brown chairs painted white make such a difference to the ease with which I moved around the room? The answer, I realized, was that the old brown color had been more or less the same tone as the kitchen floor and I was constantly knocking into them. Now the magnolia white paint was a splendid contrast to the dark red and I no longer had any trouble.

This discovery led me to think further on the subject of contrasting tones. I realized that I had previously left light-colored tea-towels on the backs of these brown chairs merely to create a contrast. I then wondered why I had not painted the table legs white as well, and found that it had not been necessary because the white table top gave sufficient contrast and it had been better to keep the table legs brown, thus reducing visual confusion. I also asked myself what had prompted me to cover the seats of those chairs with what were, to me, mud-colored cushions? (They were in fact a cheerful red and white check.) The muddy color, for me, had in fact masked the dazzling whiteness of the surface of the chair seat; without breaking up the general shape of the chair it had made looking at it a more restful process. I realized why I liked the dark red floor so much, because I found it provided a restful and undistracting surface on which to look down. This insight also gave the answer to why the dark red draining-board seemed so satisfactory. The darkness absorbed the light coming through the window and I could concentrate my attention on the things that were on the draining-board, such as light-colored dishes. The dark draining-board, well cleaned, was an ideal pastry-board because the white flour showed up well against it.

All these 'discoveries' brought home to me that dark and light tones could help me to see more easily.

All this, so far, has been from a personal angle, and I must point out that what helps one may not be the answer for another. RP (retinitis pigmentosa) is a name which covers many different diseases and eye functions. However, by describing one person's experience, others may be prompted into joining the discussion and becoming aware of, and sensitive to, the idea of making things easier to see. For if we are to make things that are useful for our daily living more visible, and make the most of our residual vision,

we must start thinking along these lines, and not accept our surroundings as they are.

There are several different ways of making things easier to see. Magnification and lighting have been given some attention by the experts, but I have come across little popular discussion on the use of contrasting tones.

**The Bathroom:** Turning our attention to the bathroom, even small changes can make a difference. Where there is a pastel-colored floor and bath, contrast can be obtained by draping a dark-colored bath mat over the side. A dark lavatory seat is easier to see in a pale bathroom and so are light and dark striped towels. Dark curtains against a white or pale wash-basin give a further contrast and light-colored toothpaste and toothbrushes are easier to see if held up against them. If your bathroom is pale, try dark-colored soap and flannels to aid vision.

**In The Kitchen:** Small significant features such as a handle or aperture can also aid vision. For instance, a light-colored teapot can make all the difference to being able to pour water successfully, because the hole into which you have to pour is dark, and you can aim at it better when there is a contrasting light surrounding it. It is the same with different colored liquids poured into cups, mugs, and jugs. You can see when a pale liquid is coming to the top of a dark container, or a dark drink is coming to the top of a light container. It is easier to find a dark handle on top of a light-colored kettle, and once found, it indicates the position of the spout. Door handles and knobs, cupboard handles, bells and door numbers can all be seen more clearly against a contrasting background. In an area of a room where there are mostly dark tones, a significant feature can be picked out by placing another thing on it; such as a light-colored book or newspaper on a coffee table or a light cushion on a chair. Even people with good sight are grateful for contrasting nosings on steps in unexpected places.

**In The Garden:** It is easier to see the garden gate or the front door if they are painted in contrasting colors to their immediate surroundings. The gravel or concrete paths, if they are light, contrast with the flower-beds; where the lawn or beds meet the placing of light stones, corner stones or white edging material again helps vision. The watering-can, the washing line and laundry bowl are more visible if they are light-colored. But on the other hand, if the washing line is over a concrete area, a dark bowl is easier to see. Yellow or white flowers are more visible against a brick wall, whereas red geraniums show up against a white-washed wall. On a country walk when in single file, it helps if the person in front wears light clothing or a light scarf.

**Backgrounds And Surfaces:** Dark floors or ceilings can give an immediate impression of the size of a room; and where furniture masks the floor a dark ceiling is better. A dark carpet will show up

a light bedspread; a dark door can easily be found in a light wall. On a small scale, it is useful if the backgrounds can be flexible. That is to say, it is useful to have a choice of light or dark trays for your light or dark crockery and the same with tablecloths. Someone I heard of even chooses his plates according to the tone of his food. But if an object is mobile it helps if the object itself contrasts, for instance a small mobile child dressed in a striped football jersey.

**Unhelpful Contrasts:** There are three areas of contrasting tones that can be confusing and sometimes a hindrance. Firstly, those tones which give no useful information, such as flooring with large dark and light squares or large floral patterns in contrasting tones. Such floorings sometimes make me feel giddy as I stand trying to make out what is important. It is the same with bedspreads and tablecloths, such bold decoration is too distracting and significant items cannot easily be found when placed on them. With this I would include false nosings where floor patterns in corridors suggest steps that are not there. A second aspect is shadow. Some shadows give an indication of the position, size and shape of an object which is just out of range of your vision or has no other contrasting feature. But other shadows, especially broken ones, where light comes through trees, railings or chair legs, can confuse things that you need to see. A third consideration is reflecting surfaces. A nice dark floor can guide you along a light corridor but if a bright light is reflected off its surface, it can become dazzlingly bright and no use at all. This also happens with white crockery on a polished table. But, on the other hand, it is sometimes only the gleam of a reflecting surface that indicates the presence of an object in a dark area.

Lighting has an effect on the way in which objects show up in the home and recently lighting experts have been pressing for better illumination in the home. Personally, I find that sometimes stronger illumination results in too much dazzle and with a loss of strength of contrasting tones. So lighting too can help or hinder contrasts, depending on the angle or if the source of light is hidden as in discreet lighting.

I am grafetul that I did the A-level art course at school, even though I could hardly read the examination print. I nevertheless learnt a lot about perspective, size, shape, volume, texture, color and the change of the aspect of surfaces under different lights and conditions, i.e., rain. Studying objects and drawing them from memory, clues from contrasting tones; all these things became more important as my sight deteriorated as they helped me to build up a whole picture in my mind from perhaps one small significant visual clue.

Let me finish with a caution. If the idea of using contrasting tones appeals to you, be careful not to make things more difficult for youself by attempting to follow every detail. You will surely

become crazy in the effort. Moving about more easily is often a matter of what you are used to and perhaps you should only think of contrasting tones when buying new items. Expense, taste, and habit prevent me from following many of the ideas discussed. Indeed, to follow all of them might produce a most peculiar house and garden!

## Avoiding Eye Strain

By William Padula, O.D. and Cheryl McQueen

**What causes eye strain?** We feel eye fatigue or strain when the physical surroundings make demands on our eyes that are hard to handle—dim lighting, small details, items similar in color, shape, or size, and when there's no time for more than a quick glance.

**Will eye strain damage my eyes?** Eye strain will not necessarily harm your eyes, but if the cause is not avoided, you may experience discomfort more often.

**What are signs of eye strain?** "Tired" eyes, blurry vision, vision going in and out of focus, tears, and pain in the eyes are direct symptoms of eye fatigue. Because eyes are one part of a whole connected system, strain may also be indicated by headaches, pain in the forehead, backaches, neckaches, poor concentration, or day-dreaming.

**How can strain be avoided?** Good lighting, contrasts in color, large-size objects, and good posture can help. But even in the best of surroundings, our eyes will tire if we don't take time for a visual break.

**What are "visual breaks" and when are they needed?** The need for relieving your eyes will depend on your visual abilities and the conditions of the surroundings. Situations differ, so you may need to rest your eyes every five minutes sometimes, every fifteen or twenty minutes other times. The goal is to prevent eye fatigue by taking visual breaks, not just to relieve it. Time yourself to see how long you can do concentrated work without eye strain. If you feel tired after thirty minutes, you have waited too long to take a break.

The following eye-resting methods are recommended by many eye care experts for relaxing and refreshing the eyes. Be sure to:

- Check with your doctor before trying these if you have special eye conditions or back or neck problems.
- Do the exercises while sitting down, since a slight loss of balance may occur if eyes are closed while standing up.
- Touch only the area around the eyes, not the eyes themselves.

**Eye-Resting**

**Looking At A Distance Point:** Look away from your activity to a point in the distance, at least ten to fifteen feet away. This will help relieve strain on the eyes. Do not look out windows as that is usually a glary area.

**Palming:** This may also relieve visual tension. It is helpful, but not necessary, to have a table to rest your elbows on while doing this technique. If you are in bed or do not have a table handy where you are sitting, a stack of pillows on the lap, or a lap desk might also be used for elbow props.

1. Rest elbows on the table in front of you.

2. Cover your eyes with the palms of your hands closing out all light, but slightly cupping them so that you can open your eyes. (Gently place palms over eyes with the lower edge of palms against the bone below your eyes, with sides of palms against nose.)

3. Look into the darkness for three to five minutes.

4. Relax and gently blink your eyes naturally several times.

5. Uncover your eyes when they feel refreshed.

**Eye Massage:** The overall idea of this exercise is to massage the area around your eyes, gently but firmly, with your fingertips to relax the muscles around the eyes.

1. Place your fingertips above your eyes on your browbone, about the middle of your eyebrow.

2. Press gently but briskly, in a circular motion for about five to ten seconds.

3. Move your fingertips outward to the area at the end of your eyebrow; press and massage again the same way.

4. Continue around your eyes in a similar manner to the points just out from the outer corners of your eyes; and then to the bony areas below your eyes.

5. Make two complete circles around your eyes.

6. Massage the same points around your eyes again, but this time reverse your circular motion.

**Temple Massage:** This movement will relax the muscles in the temple area.

1. Place your fingertips on your temples.

2. Press gently, but firmly in a circular motion to massage the area. Do this slowly and soothingly for about thirty seconds or one minute.

3. Reverse the direction of your circular motion and massage again.

**Eye Blinks:** While keeping your head still and facing forward, do the following:

1. Just with your eyes, look up as far as you can and blink several times.

2. Holding your head still and facing forward, look down as far as you can and blink again several times.

3. Facing forward, look to the left side and blink several times; then to the right side and blink several times.

**Neck And Shoulder Relaxers**

Do these muscle stretches gently and slowly. It is possible that you may feel a little soreness or stiffness the day after you do these exercises the first time, especially if you have not used these muscles in a long time. The best way to relieve the stiffness is to do the exercises again, gently and slowly.

**Head Rolls:** If doing the head rolls for the first time, do not stretch your head and neck to the limit. Do so only after you can do the exercise easily and comfortably.

1. Sit up straight and let your arms hang loosely at your sides.

2. Slowly lean your head to the left side as far as you can and hold for thirty seconds; then lean your head to the right and hold for thirty seconds.

3. Lean your head forward as far as you can and rest chin on chest (keeping back straight) for thirty seconds.

4. Lean your head as far back as you can for thirty seconds.

5. Now, in a smooth circular motion, roll your head to the side, to the back, to the other side, to the front. Reverse the circular motions and repeat.

**Shoulder Rolls:**

1. With your head facing forward and back straight, make a circle with your shoulders—moving them up, back, down, forward, and back to straight position. Make three circles.

2. Reverse the direction—shoulders forward, down, back, up, to straight position, for three circles.

Now, if you are feeling very coordinated, do the head rolls and shoulder rolls at the same time. Yes! This is almost like trying to pat your head and rub your stomach at the same time. But it is fun to try! You could also try to just lean your head forward and backward while rotating your shoulders.

## Low Vision

By William V. Padula, O.D.

**What Is Low Vision?** A term used to describe several degrees of visual impairment which affect a person's ability to manage everyday activities. Most visually impaired persons are not totally blind, but have some usable vision, and can benefit from low vision services—methods of making the best possible use of remaining vision.

**Visual Impairment:** Any disorder of the eyes or visual system that interferes with the function of the eyes and/or associated organs is a visual impairment; the interference with the individual's performance may vary depending upon the type and severity of

the impairment, the environmental demands, and the efficiency by which any residual vision is utilized.

A visual impairment may be severe, causing much loss of vision, or moderate, causing only a slight blurring of distance and/or near vision. A large number of vision problems are caused by diseases such as cataract, glaucoma, or diabetes, which often can be prevented when detected and treated early enough.

There are approximately 11.4 million people in the United States with a visual impairment that cannot be corrected by ordinary eyeglasses. Although a visual impairment can affect a person at any stage of life, age is the greatest predictor of an impairment. The older a person becomes, the greater the possibility of developing a visual impairment. The nature of visual impairments vary, depending upon the cause. Generally, impairments affect acuity (the ability to see clearly) and/or the visual field (the scope or range of vision, including both central and peripheral vision). In turn, a visual impairment can affect a person's ability to manage daily routines.

**Affect On Everyday Activities:** Cooking, reading a medicine bottle or syringe, writing a check, seeing a traffic light, grocery shopping, and grooming—activities which are usually taken for granted by people with "normal" vision—can become monumental problems for a person with a slight impairment. Entertainment can become very limited, since socializing, watching TV, reading or writing is often difficult.

The frustrations of a visual impairment affect individuals differently, but some people may experience such symptoms as depression, irritability, confusion, dizziness, lack of continuity of thought, poor concentration, or poor memory. It should be realized, however, that these conditions can be symptoms of visual impairment—not aging—and may be treatable.

**Visual Rehabilitation:** Until recently, visually impaired persons were treated as if they were totally blind. Because many older people cannot see well enough to manage entirely on their own, they have been placed in nursing homes and other institutions to compensate for vision losses. Today, however, through low vision services, many aging visually impaired persons can be visually rehabilitated and can continue to live independently.

**Low Vision Evaluation:** A special evaluation which differs from a routine eye examination is performed by an optometrist or ophthalmologist who specializes in low vision. The purpose of this low vision evaluation is to prescribe optical aids that will enable people to make the most of their remaining vision for their particular activities and responsibilities. A wide variety of aids are available, including hand-held or stand magnifiers that improve close vision, telescopes that are hand-held or mounted in eyeglasses for distance vision (reading signs, traffic signals, etc.), and even a

closed circuit television which can magnify reading material up to forty times the original size.

**In Addition To Optical Aids:** Some people can benefit from other areas of rehabilitative services, such as orientation and mobility (skills for traveling about independently), activities of daily living (housekeeping), employment (keeping an old job or finding a new one), and use of leisure time.

**Cost Of Low Vision Services:** Because of the greater amount of time spent working with a person, low vision services are more expensive than a regular eye examination. Adults with less than 20/200 acuity, or less than a 20 degree field with best corrective glasses, may be eligible to receive these services from the specializing doctor of their choice without direct costs (depending on state regulations and laws). For those who do not qualify, other federal and private party insurance may pay for the services completely, or subsidize the costs. Qualification for such reimbursement varies from state to state and according to type and degree of vision loss. For more information contact:

- Your local or state blindness agency or low vision clinic
- Low Vision
  American Foundation for the Blind
  15 West 16th Street
  New York, New York 10011
  (212) 620-2000

# Take Home Pages

## Lighting Tips For Older Adults

Using good lighting is one of the easiest ways to prevent eye strain and to compensate for some of the typical vision changes that are experienced in later years. Is your lighting as "good" as it could be? Use the tips for proper lighting as a check.

**Use Enough Light**

☐ Most people need to increase the amount of light they use as they grow older, although different people may require different amounts of light. To use enough light:

- Provide light throughout the room along with additional light **near** detailed activities.
- Use at least 200 watts for close work, as recommended by vision and lighting experts.
- In hallways and stairways, provide generous amounts of light positioned to shine on walls, floors, steps, and railings.

☐ Try these ways to provide more light where it is needed:

- Increase the wattage of light bulbs if lamps will accept more.
- Move lamps closer to your work.
- Use high-intensity or incandescent-fluorescent lamps for greater amounts of concentrated light (but avoid tiny tensor lights).

**Control Glare**

☐ Sensitivity to glare usually increases with age. Glary "bright spots" are noticed more easily, and are much more bothersome when present. Beware of glare and take steps to control it:

- Cover bare light bulbs of all types.
- Soften bright light from windows with coverings like blinds, sheers, shades, awnings, etc. which close out glare while still allowing light to pass through.
- Cover or remove shiny surfaces, such as floors, walls, and tabletops, in and around activity areas.
- Don't work or talk to someone while facing bright light from a window or lamp.
- Don't work in a pool of light surrounded by darkness.

**Avoid Sudden Changes From Dark To Light**

☐ It takes older eyes longer to adjust to abrupt changes in light—whether from dim to bright light or from bright lighting to darkness. To avoid sudden changes:

- Use night lights for dim areas at all times.
- Use 3-way bulbs, high-low, or dimmer switches near doorways which can be turned up or down as eyes adjust.
- Keep a flashlight by the bed to use at night.
- Wear sunglasses or brimmed hats to shade eyes outdoors.
- For safety, be patient for one or two minutes while eyes adjust.

**Use Fluorescent Lighting With Care**

☐ Glare, flickering, and humming from fluorescent lighting often become more bothersome. To avoid these irritations, ask at a hardware or lighting store about how to properly:

- Cover all fluorescent tubes.
- Use "full spectrum" fluorescent tubes which are most like sunlight and are less glary.
- Replace old tubes which flicker and buzz.
- Adjust ballasts if new tubes flicker or hum.

### Look For Cost-And Energy-Saving Solutions

☐ Remember that dim lighting is risky, not economical, and that there are ways to provide adequate light without great cost. Here are some suggestions to begin with:

- Use 3-way bulbs, high-low switches, and dimmer lights which can be turned down when not needed.
- Check a local hardware store for new types of energy- and cost-saving bulbs and other equipment.

### Position Lamps Properly

☐ Many lighting arrangements, especially those for concentrated tasks, could be noticeably improved with some careful attention and a few easy adjustments to the position of lamps. For the best lamp light:

- Place lamps so that bulbs are 15 inches above and 15 inches to one side of objects being viewed.
- Position lamps to the side, not directly in front of you, to avoid glare.
- Place lamps on the opposite side of the hand being used to prevent casting shadows.
- Use lampshades that direct light where it is needed.
- Locate the bottom edge of lampshades just below eye level.

## Making Things Easier To See And Do

Here are the important things to remember when using vision. Think about one activity you do and check the ways you make it easier and more comfortable for your eyes.

### Shed Good Light On The Subject

_____ Use a light near my activity along with light throughout the room.

_____ Use more light for working close.

_____ Control glare from light bulbs, windows, and shiny surfaces.

_____ Avoid sudden changes from bright to dim light.

### Contrast For Clarity

_____ Contrast light and dark tones.

_____ Avoid patterned backgrounds and shadows.

_____ Contrast textures, shapes, and sizes.

**Take Time For A Break**

_____ Take time for frequent visual breaks.

_____ Take time to rest my eyes.

_____ Use good posture.

_____ Use comfortable seating that supports my posture.

**Find The Size That Fits**

_____ Use large, more visible items.

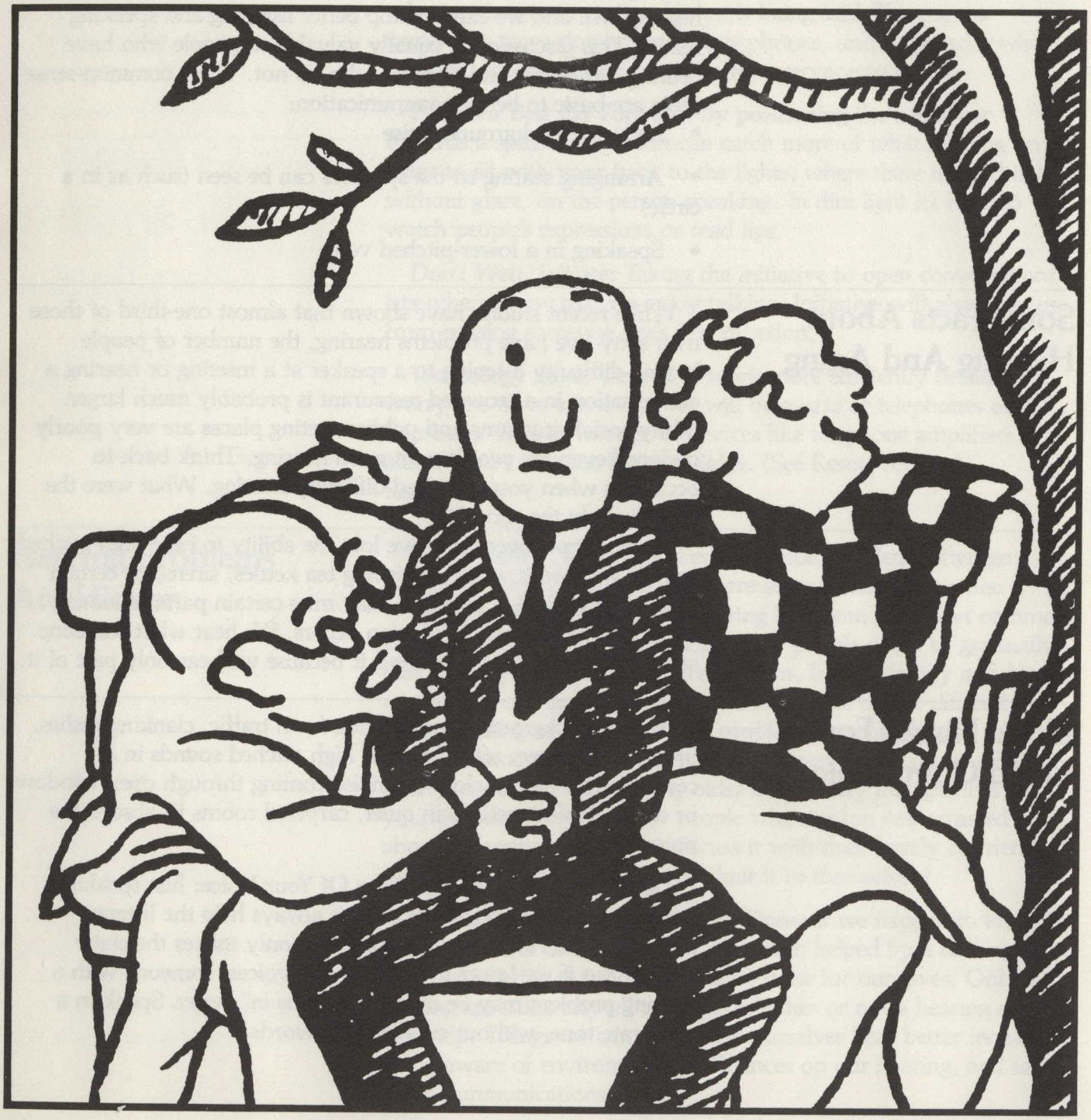
_____ Bring things closer to my eyes.

_____ Use props like pillows or lap desks to make bringing things closer convenient and comfortable.

_____ Use magnifiers (check with a low-vision clinic).

# Chapter Four HEARING AND UNDERSTANDING

## Improving Communication With Others



# Introduction

## Hearing And The Environment

Communicating effectively can be a challenge for anyone at any age. In these hurly-burly days of loud radios, blaring televisions, and honking horns, it is particularly difficult to converse above all the commotion. The noisy environment can make life very stressful, especially if we have to strain to hear because of a partial hearing loss that often occurs in later years.

Although we can make only certain improvements in our hearing abilities, we can make the surroundings more conducive to hearing well and we can develop better listening and speaking habits. This discussion is equally valuable to people who have hearing difficulties and to those who do not. Three common-sense ideas are basic to better communication:

- Reducing background noise
- Arranging seating so the speakers can be seen (such as in a circle)
- Speaking in a lower-pitched voice

## Some Facts About Hearing And Aging

While recent studies have shown that almost one-third of those over sixty-five have problems hearing, the number of people having difficulty listening to a speaker at a meeting or hearing a conversation in a crowded restaurant is probably much larger. Many social situations and public meeting places are very poorly designed even for people with good hearing. Think back to occasions when you have had difficulty hearing. What were the conditions in the room?

Many people over sixty-five lose the ability to hear high-pitched sounds—women's voices, whistling tea kettles, sirens, or certain letters (F,T,P,S). A a result we may miss certain parts of words, sentences, or phrases. Confusion occurs. We hear what someone says, but we do not understand it because we hear only part of it.

## Good Habits For Good Communication

**Reduce Background Noise:** Noise from traffic, clanking dishes, or air conditioners often "masks" high pitched sounds in a conversation. Try to close out noise coming through open windows or doors. Hold meetings in quiet, carpeted rooms to absorb the noise.

**Don't Shout—Lower The Tone Of Your Voice:** Just speaking louder or turning up the TV doesn't always help the listener. Increasing the volume on a small radio only makes the static louder! But if we lower the tone of our voices, someone with a hearing problem may be able to "tune us in" better. Speak in a moderate tone, without exaggerating words.

**Don't Confuse Vision Problems With Hearing Problems:** Remember, it is not necessary to raise your voice when speaking to visually impaired or blind persons unless they also have difficulty hearing. People sometimes mistakenly do this in an effort to be understood.

**Smile Or Catch My Eye If You Understand:** Hearing aids and hearing problems can tire us out when we try to "listen hard." We can help each other by taking breaks, smiling, or saying "yes, umhum" to each other in encouragement.

**Speak At A Moderate Pace:** People with hearing problems need a longer time to understand what is being said. If we speak somewhat more slowly, use longer phrases, and summarize when possible, conversations are easier for everyone to follow.

**Put Your Best Ear Forward:** By positioning the better ear towards a speaker, a person can catch more of what is going on. It helps to sit with your back to the lights, where there is good light, without glare, on the person speaking. In dim light it's hard to watch people's expressions or read lips.

**Don't Wait, Initiate:** Taking the initiative to open conversations lets others know that we enjoy talking. Initiative will also keep us from missing someone else's first question.

**Technology Saves Time:** We work more efficiently because we worry less if we know that we will be aware of telephones or doorbells. Take advantage of devices like telephone amplifiers or alarm clocks that use flashing lights. (See Resources And References).

## Hearing Problems Are Hidden

Unfortunately, hearing and conversation problems often go unreported and untreated. There are several reasons for this:

**We May Not Recognize A Hearing Problem:** The most common kinds of hearing problems among older people occur so gradually that we may not even be aware of them. In fact, family and friends may detect changes in us before we are aware of our difficulty in understanding or hearing. Some people are uncomfortable talking about communication problems. It isn't easy to discuss any loss of ability associated with getting older in a society that glorifies youthfulness. Do you know people who are too embarrassed about a hearing problem to discuss it with their family or friends, mention it to doctors, or even admit it to themselves?

**We May Think Nothing Can Be Done:** If we happen to know a family member or friend who hasn't been helped by a hearing aid, we may imagine that nothing can be done for ourselves. Only a hearing specialist can tell a person whether or not a hearing aid will help. Things we can do to help ourselves hear better include being aware of environmental influences on our hearing, and using good communications skills.

Whenever talking with anyone or any group, remember that people tend to be sensitive about their hearing abilities. This sensitivity can make it difficult for the person with a hearing problem to ask for what he or she really needs from others to make communication easier.

One of the most valuable aspects of the U.S.E. program is the way people share personal experiences and encourage one another. Being part of a group in which others openly discuss their hearing problems, and ways they have solved them, can give the sensitive individual confidence to do the same in other situations as well. Better communication results from thoughtfulness and attention to others, hearing tests, the use of technological aids, and from expressing hearing needs openly and directly. By exchanging ideas about these things, we can set the stage for good communication.

# One: To Keep In Mind

☐ For a discussion totaling one hour and thirty minutes, plan approximately:

- 15 minutes for introductions and Getting Started
- 1 hour for Guiding The Discussion
- 15 minutes for Ending The Discussion

Additional time breakdowns are suggested in the guide. Also take time for a stretch break about midway through the meeting as noted.

☐ Make sure each person gets to respond to a question during Getting Started. This may mean asking some people direct questions, and asking others to hold back.

☐ Listen for the words people use to describe the surroundings and use their words when asking questions or encouraging discussion.

☐ As you discuss each topic during the session:

- Refer to and repeat examples people give during Getting Started to illustrate points;
- Encourage people to come up with ideas for other ways to make adjustments that may not have been mentioned;
- Give people a chance to come up with their own responses before using examples or tips given in the chapter or shown on the Big Pad;
- Use the Big Pad as a visual reminder of the topic being discussed, and to summarize the main points.

☐ Be prepared for some people to reject the suggestions of others. We all have our own habits and new ideas may take a little time to accept, or may not make sense for our particular needs. Give ideas time to sink in or tell people to use whatever seems right for them.

☐ Make a list of any questions that come up that are appropriate for experts to answer.

## Especially For The Hearing Discussion

☐ When the subject of hearing aids comes up, be sure to explain that many people, but not everyone, can be helped by a hearing aid. How well a hearing aid works depends on the type of hearing loss, the quality of the aid, how well it has been fitted, how well it is taken care of (replacing batteries, etc.), and how well a person adjusts to using it.

☐ To help people talk about hearing problems and situations that are difficult for them, describe your own experiences with situations where it's hard to hear and easy to misunderstand.

# Two: Just Before The Meeting

☐ Come ahead of time to arrange the meeting place and make sure you have everything you need. Ask people who arrive early to help you with arrangements. Some things to check:

- Chairs arranged around a table, or in a circle with paths for easy entry and exit
- Good lighting, without glare
- Little or no background noise (close doors and possibly windows)
- Comfortable room temperature and ventilation
- Ample space for movement and display

☐ Ask people to assist you with setting up these items which you need to bring for this meeting:

- This guidebook
- Copies of the Take Home Pages for everyone
- Pens for anyone who might want to take notes
- Big Pad (open to picture 18)
- Table, chair, or easel beside your chair for the Big Pad
- Watch or clock
- Paper for a list of Hints To Try
- Name tags as reminders for new group members

☐ Introduce yourself after everyone has arrived and is settled in. Hand out Take Home Pages so that people can make notes and so they have a personal reminder of the important points of the day.

☐ Go around the group with introductions. Use your personal touch to help put yourself and the group at ease.

☐ Name the topic, "Hearing and Understanding: Improving Communication With Others." Explain that the meeting will last about an hour and thirty minutes.

☐ Describe the focus of the discussion: "During the next hour and a half we're going to talk about some ways to improve skills in hearing and speaking. We will also find ways to make changes in our physical surroundings so it is easier to understand what is going on. Finally, we will exchange some hints about tactful ways to tell people what we want them to do, and how to handle awkward situations."

☐ Encourage group members to participate and share their own experiences and hints. Explain that you are not an authority; each person has learned to be an expert problem-solver in one way or another and we want to bring that out today.

☐ Ask your partner or a volunteer from the group to make a list of Hints To Try as good ideas are described during the discussion.

# Three: Getting Started

## I Can't Hear You When . . .

**(15 minutes is suggested for discussing everyone's difficult hearing experiences. Encourage everyone to participate. Give people a chance to describe their own examples before using a few of the situations listed below to spur discussion.**

**18. I can't hear you when the water's running**

☐ There are many situations when it is difficult to hear or talk, especially if the surroundings are interfering with our efforts. The running water and not looking at each other are causing problems for the people in this picture. What situations have you been in where you've had to "listen hard?"

☐ How about:

- At a family dinner with everyone talking at once?
- Getting directions at a bus stop on a busy street?
- Trying to have a conversation while the TV is on?
- Talking with a friend while you're making dinner or working on a hobby?
- Listening to the radio on a hot day with a fan or air conditioner running?
- Sitting in the back of a large auditorium with too little light on the speaker?
- Talking with the driver from the back seat of a car?

- Hearing a political speaker over a booming public address system in a large, uncarpeted hall?
- Talking to a man who wears a big handlebar moustache or a full beard?
- Being so excited to tell your friend the latest news that you didn't pay attention to what she or he had to say?
- Burning a tea kettle because you were out of the room and didn't hear the whistle?
- Attending a discussion meeting while other people were playing cards or music in the same room?

☐ Can you think of other situations in which it's a real effort to understand or hear things clearly?

# Four: Guiding The Discussion

**(20 minutes is recommended for discussing these True-False questions. Use these questions as discussion starters—not test questions!)**

☐ As those situations showed, many things affect communication besides the ability to hear. Let's try these questions to explore what we know about listening and hearing.

1. True or False? People hear better with their glasses on.

☐ True! Who answered true? Why do you think that's true? What difference do good lighting and glasses make to hearing well?

**19. Wait!—I hear you better with my glasses on**

☐ Like this fellow in the illustration, we rely on vision more than we realize to understand what people are saying.

☐ What else helps us get the whole message in a conversation?

☐ Tips:
- Gestures
- Facial expressions
- Lip reading

2. True or False? Hearing changes occur suddenly.

☐ False! Most hearing changes occur so gradually we may not even notice them for a while.

3. True or False? Hearing and memory have nothing to do with each other.

☐ False! Who answered false? How are hearing and memory related?

☐ Memory involves taking in information as well as recalling it. Have you ever forgotten something you didn't hear well in the first place, like someone's name?

☐ Did you think it was a problem with your memory?

**20. I didn't hear the kettle whistle**

☐ Can you think of sounds that remind us to do something? Some "sound" reminders in this picture are the kettle's whistle, timer's buzz, cat's meow and bird's singing. Can you think of others?

☐ What about:

- Water running in the sink?
- When the washing maching buzzes or clicks off?
- Oven timer?

☐ Who has ever forgotten something like this because of not hearing the reminder?

☐ What else besides sound could you use to remind yourself?

☐ Tips:

- Notes where you can see them
- Pets that alert you to sounds

4. True or False? Hearing aids always make everthing sound just like it did before.

☐ False! Hearing aids can help in some situations but several other things contribute to how well a hearing aid works. Let's look at some of them in the environment.

**21. Reduce background noise**

**(20 minutes is suggested for discussing these three "Hearing Thieves.")**

☐ Some things in the physical surroundings make hearing difficult. We can think of these as "Hearing Thieves" that rob us of voices and other sounds we want to hear, and disrupt concentration. Here are some examples.

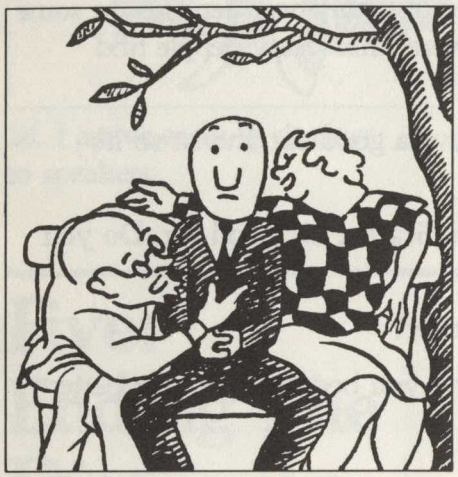
☐ What background noises hide sounds you are trying to hear? Think of a situation where background noise was a problem for you, like the street noises in this picture.

☐ What did you do about it?

☐ Do you, or others in the group, have ideas about what else you could try?

☐ Tips:

- Turn off TV or radio
- Close doors or windows
- Soften noises with carpet or draperies
- Turn off the water, fan, etc.



22. Rearrange awkward seating

☐ Think of a time when awkward seating arrangements made it hard to face someone or to use your "good ear."

☐ What did you do about it?

☐ What else might have helped?

☐ Tips:

- Choose a "good" seat to begin with
- Rearrange chairs
- Switch seats
- Avoid trying to have important conversations in places where the seating is awkward

☐ Have you ever had problems talking in:

- Cars?
- Buses?
- Trains?
- Airplanes?

23. Adjust dim lighting or glare

☐ Has dim lighting, like the candlelight in this picture, or glare ever made it hard for you to check what you hear with the gestures and expressions you see?

☐ What did you do about it?

☐ What else might have helped?

☐ Tips:

- Add more light
- Avoid shadows on people's faces
- If someone is sitting in front of a window or a bright light, ask them to move or shade the light

☐ Have you noiced it's harder to understand the television when it's in front of a window?

☐ What could you do?

**Stretch:** Let's take time for a short stretch break to "rest our ears" before we go on to talk about some other things that are important to good communication.

**24. I let people know I have a good ear**

**(20 minutes is recommended for exchanging helpful "Conversation Cues.")**

☐ Often, how much we enjoy social experiences depends on some "Conversation Cues." Here are several that many people find helpful.

☐ "I always let people know I have a good ear and sit so it's closest to them."

☐ This woman in the picture is indicating her good ear. Do you know someone who does this?

☐ How does he or she let you know?

☐ In what kinds of situations have you been able to hear better by changing your position?

**25. It's best to speak slowly in a normal tone**

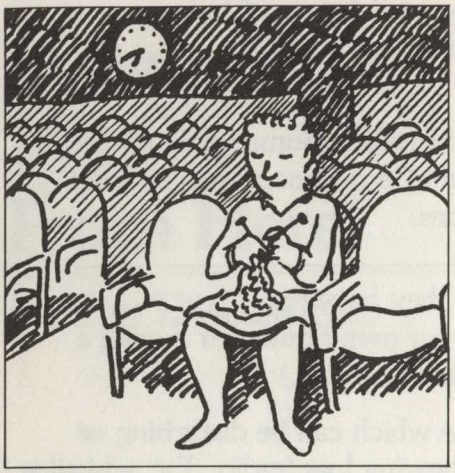
☐ "It's best for me if people speak in a normal tone of voice, but not too fast."

☐ How could you ask people to slow down, or not speak in a high voice?

☐ This grandparent may not enjoy the children when they are so noisy—what could she do?

☐ Does your group talk all at once?

☐ How do you remind each other to speak one at a time?



26. I arrive early to sit close to speakers

☐ "I always get to a lecture early so I can sit up close to the speaker."

☐ What other good tips can help someone participate in public meetings or events?

☐ "I convince people to use a microphone, even if they protest and make excuses."

☐ Being a good listener is an important part of communication. What makes someone a good listener?

☐ Tips:

- Pay attention to the speaker
- Wait for others to finish speaking
- Speak one at a time

# Five: Ending The Discussion

☐ Summarize the main points of the discussion by reviewing the captions on the Big Pad. Ask everyone to help you review the good ideas they suggested to each other. Make a list of these Hints To Try to give group members.

☐ Go around the circle and ask for comments.

☐ Announce the date, time, place, and topic of the next meeting. If your group has an open-ended schedule, decide together if you want to spend another session on this topic before proceeding. If so, describe the ideas for Further Discussions listed under Where Do We Go From Here?, or come up with your own.

☐ Check that everyone has the Take Home Pages, "Improving Communication With Others."

☐ Thank everyone for participating.

# Additional Suggestions

If members of the group have serious vision or hearing impairments, this session can be of particular value. Before the discussion, read the entire chapter to become familiar with the information presented and ways to encourage participants to share tips and solve problems together. Also review the general communications guidelines for visually and hearing impaired persons.

## Hearing Impaired Persons

☐ People who have been living with serious hearing impairment probably will be familiar with much of the material in this session. If the people with whom you meet have different levels of hearing loss, ask the more impaired members to be the voice of experience and make suggestions to help others cope with this condition.

☐ If everyone in the group has a severe hearing loss, you can adapt the discussion guide as follows:

- Skip the True-False questions.
- For the examples in "Putting Yourself in Someone Else's Shoes," substitute examples from participants' experiences with difficult hearing or communication situations.

## Visually And Hearing Impaired Persons

☐ Ask group members what tips they have for:

- The best times and places in your own homes for having a conversation (porch, kitchen, after dinner, etc.)
- Dealing with background noise which can be disturbing or distracting to people with partial hearing loss (radio, TV, whistling appliances, etc.)

☐ Discuss how to handle the following:

- Comfortable use of talking books, radios, or other new equipment from library services for the blind and physically disabled
- Telephoning, rides or transportation, correspondence
- Shopping or doing business in busy places (banking, grocery, holiday shopping)
- Entertainment (movies, TV, etc.—what good alternatives are there in this community?)
- Keeping up with exercising
- Preventing accidents—particularly falls, tripping, and accidents at crossroads
- Use of pets to make up for vision or hearing losses (to signal that you have visitors, identify the source of sounds, find dropped objects, etc.)

☐ Discuss what situations group members most need assistance with and how help could be provided.

☐ If appropriate, have a guest or representative from a rehabilitation service for deaf-blind persons meet with the group. Contact:

- Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youth and Adults
  111 Middle Neck Road
  Sands Point, New York 11050
  Tel.: (516) 944-8900

# Where Do We Go From Here?

## Further Discussions

☐ For Review And More Information. During a meeting, read aloud the Introduction to this chapter, "Hearing And The Environment." Discuss questions or responses that people have. Make a list of any questions that are appropriate for experts, and with the group figure out where to go for answers. Suggest local organizations and knowledgeable persons, as well as the organizations, articles, and booklets listed under Resources And References. Also copy and distribute the Background Reading for group members interested in more information.

☐ Do the activity "Putting Yourself In Someone Else's Shoes" on page 92.

☐ Contact a speech and hearing clinic (check the Yellow Pages) and arrange for all interested members to be tested. Ask specifically for a hearing specialist and make it clear that you are not interested in a sales pitch on hearing aids.

☐ Ask an audiologist, someone from a hearing and speech clinic, or a professional from the communication/speech department of a local college to speak to the group about medical aspects of hearing and hearing aids.

☐ Discuss the experience of living with or communicating with a companion who has a severe hearing impairment.

☐ Make a list of suggestions in advance to guest speakers who come to various community meetings—politicians, lecturers, teachers. Also distribute these guidelines to organizations that sponsor public events with speakers.

☐ Explore new appliances and aids for the home, such as lights on doorbells or on the phone, through brochures (see Resources And References) or presentations by the telephone company. In some cities, the telephone company may even have an exhibit you can visit.

☐ Make a list of restaurants and places for free entertainment that are best for you to go to if you have a hearing problem—ones with good lighting and not too much noise.

☐ Take on a community project, like improving the hearing environment of the place where you meet, the senior center lunch room or multi-purpose area, by adding texture and sound-

absorbing materials such as wall hangings, tablecloths, quilts, etc., or having the theater provide wireless amplifiers for people with hearing problems.

☐ Send away for some of the pamphlets suggested under Resources And References and use these as the basis for discussion.

☐ Ask a representative from an organization listed below to speak to your group.

☐ Ask for someone to speak on legislation and benefits for hearing impaired people—from evaluations, to training, to low cost aids.

## Putting Yourself In Someone Else's Shoes

Sometimes, no matter how sensitive we are, we may find ourselves in awkward social situations where it's difficult to communicate. Describe the following situations to the group and ask them to imagine that they are "in someone else's shoes" when answering these questions or "playing out" each of these scenes. Use these four questions with each situation to focus on the communication problems and get people to suggest their own tricks or tactful ways for handling these awkward situations:

- What's the communication problem in this situation?
- Are there any "Hearing Thieves" that can be caught?
- Would any "Conversation Cues" help?
- What could you say or do in this situation?

☐ You meet someone who has just moved into your neighborhood or apartment building at a get-acquainted gathering. As you talk with him, you notice that he misunderstands you several times and asks you to repeat what you have said. How do you handle this situation?

☐ At a holiday family dinner, everyone is telling stories about the stunts they pulled when they were kids. One man tells a funny story and everyone laughts—except Aunt Sally, who just smiles. She wears a hearing aid, and you realize that she probably didn't hear the punch line. What do you say to her? What if she had the hearing aid off on purpose?

☐ You and your friend Mary have enjoyed going to club meetings together for years. She has gradually developed a hearing problem and wears a hearing aid. She tells you that she's going to stop going to meetings because she doesn't enjoy them as much anymore. It's to hard to keep up with what is being said, especially when several people talk at once, as they often do. How could the two of you work together to make the meetings more enjoyable for Mary? For anyone else?

☐ You wear a hearing aid which amplifies all sounds. When your children and grandchildren visit, even the slamming of a cupboard door makes you jump, not to mention all the louder noises youngsters make. What do you do?

☐ Your garden club has started meeting in one corner of the community center multi-purpose room. During the first few meetings, other people use the room to play cards, billiards, or do crafts. The club meets in a poorly-lighted corner away from the windows, with the chairs in rows. Some people find they really have a hard time paying attention and keeping up with the discussion. What do you do?

## Resources And References

☐ As a guide to clinical services and appropriate agencies within your state, send for:

- "Resource Materials for Communicative Problems of Older Persons"
  The American Speech, Hearing and Language Association
  10801 Rockville Pike
  Rockville, Maryland 20852

☐ Contact self-help organizations for the hearing impaired to find out more about their groups, newsletters, services, tips, etc.:

- Shhh: Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, Inc.
  Post Ofice Box 34889
  Bethesda, Maryland 20334

- Consumer Organizations of the Hearing Impaired
  Box 166
  Owings Mills, Maryland 21117

- Speak Up Institute
  525 Park Avenue
  New York, New York 10021

☐ Product Information. Don't forget to check with the telephone company about their consumer products for the hard of hearing. For other information see:

- "Resource Materials on Hearing and Hearing Loss: Suggested References for the Interested Non-professional Reader," by Dr. Ralph Rupp, in *Michigan Speech and Hearing Association Journal*, Volume 10, No. 1, pp. 30-47.

☐ For further information about all aspects of hearing losses and hearing rehabilitation, for a subscription to *Hearing Rehabilitation Quarterly,* and for excellent free pamphlets on hearing tests, adjusting to hearing aids, communication devices, and more, contact:

- New York League for the Hard of Hearing
  71 West 23rd Street
  New York, New York 10010
  (212) 714-7650/TTY 225-1932

# Background Reading

## Learning To Hear Again

By Sidney Blackstone. Reprinted with permission from the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf, Washington, D.C. First published in their magazine, *Volta Review*, September 1945.

Next to the tragedy of losing one's hearing, the greatest shock comes from incorrectly selecting and using a hearing aid. This shock can be so great as to frighten the patient away from further and complete use of the hearing aid for very many years.

The flood of sounds, noises and voices which suddenly break into the consciousness of the person who has not heard them for years is very much like the first impact of direct sunlight on a person who has lived in a dungeon. It is therefore of serious importance that the person getting a hearing aid guard against "auditory shock" by understanding the stages through which he must travel, step by step, in relearning to hear.

**First Steps**

1. Many years before the patient notices that he is hard of hearing and has difficulty understanding speech at a distance, he has become deafened to sounds such as those of his own clothing and many ordinary noises at home and outside. The first thing the user of a hearing aid must get reaccustomed to is living again with those continuous noises. The best way of doing this is to use the hearing aid **while alone** in the house, as loud and long as possible, every day. The user should not take the hearing aid out of the house and must not wear it in very noisy places and crowds until these first steps are accomplished.

2. Sit down quietly, and turn the hearing aid on as loud as you can stand it. Do not attempt to talk to anyone. Just listen to the ordinary noises around you: the squeaking of a chair, doors opening, the humming of the refrigerator, an automobile outside, etc. Listen to these noises and try to identify them. Every time you hear a sound, say to yourself: "This is a dog barking. This is the fan blowing," etc. Listening to music is extremely helpful in this period. As for speech on the radio, see No. 10 at the end of these instructions.

Keep the instrument on as loud and as long as possible under these circumstances. As soon as it begins to annoy or tire you, turn it down until it is a little more comfortably soft and wear it at this loudness as long as you can. You may read, knit, sew, or do any work that isn't too noisy during this first stage—and listen to the sound of the work you are doing. For example, a newspaper will make an awful clatter and sometimes sound like firecrackers. When you feel you've had enough, shut the instrument off but keep it in your ear as long as possible. **Do not permit yourself to become annoyed, nervous, or "headachey."** As soon as you feel rested, turn the hearing aid on a while longer. You will find that you can wear

it a little longer each time. After several hours or days of use in this way, sitting down, you may try using the instrument while walking around.

When the ear piece begins to bother you, you may remove it, making sure that the volume control is turned off completely before putting the instrument away. As soon as you feel rested, you may put the instrument back on and repeat the performance.

3. Do not wear the hearing aid to talk to people until you are able to wear it turned on fairly loud for an hour or two while not talking to anyone. You must become so accustomed to ordinary noises that you will not pay any attention to them when talking to a person. **Not until you take these noises for granted will you be able to concentrate on the voice you want to hear.**

4. You may now use the hearing aid talking to only one person. The rest of the family should be in another room. At first listen to the one person at a distance of six feet, gradually increasing the distance to fifteen feet. Increase the volume with the distance, if necessary. At each distance, ask the person to be sure to speak normally loudly, and slowly. (It is advisable to ask a third person —who must not speak—if the speaker **is** speaking normally.) Then adjust the volume control so that you can **just** hear the person comfortably—and **keep the volume control in that position. Do not fidget with and adjust the controls constantly.** Let your ears, attention, and the speaker change instead of the volume control.

When you get along perfectly talking to one person, you may try talking to the person while other people are talking, preferably in another room. It will take some time before you get so reaccustomed to hearing other people talk that you are not distracted by them while you talk to the one person you **want** to listen to.

### Cross Conversation Difficult

5. Relearning to carry on a conversation with several people is a very difficult matter for several reasons: First, the hard of hearing person has talked only directly to one person for many years before procuring a hearing aid, so that he has lost the habit of participating in cross-conversation. Secondly, when a person loses hearing in one ear, the sense of direction of sound is also destroyed. In the cross-conversation, it is therefore almost impossible for the hard of hearing person, with or without a hearing aid, to tell who is talking from the place the speaker occupies in the room. The only way of overcoming this difficulty is by identifying the voice and especially by keen concentration.

It must also be remembered that even with normal hearing we do not hear everybody at once in a group conversation, but that the ears and mind rapidly shift attention from one person to another as each speaks. In addition to losing the sense of direction and discrimination of voices, the hard of hearing person generally

loses the speed of understanding. In a group conversation the rate of speaking is much more rapid than in speaking with one person. It therefore requires additional time to relearn to hear and understand rapidly. To state a truth frankly, many hearing aid users never learn to participate very comfortably in a group conversation. At best they learn to watch and concentrate on the one person they want most to hear and to wait until **that** person speaks. When this habit of **concentrating on one person at a time** grows, most people under sixty learn to get along pretty well in a group.

6. Do not taking the hearing aid out of the house until you feel you have gotten along as well as you can with it under the circumstances described above. **You will not be able to hear better in another house than in your own home**, because there will be new sound problems and noises to readjust to. When you are ready to take the instrument out of the house, be sure that you have found a comfortable garment and way of wearing the hearing aid. It is important that the instrument should be fixed and not move or flop around thus creating additional extraneous noises.

**Public Places**

When you are ready to leave the house, you may have to turn the volume down a little in order to avoid the shock of excessive street noises. In some cases it is necessary to shut the instrument off entirely while on the street but it is far better to turn it down sufficiently to hear a murmur. This will prevent the shock of turning the instrument on suddenly when you reach your destination.

7. When you are perfectly adjusted to wearing the hearing aid in the homes of family and friends, then you may try it in public places: a movie, show, church, meeting, etc. The problem in a public place is generally one of acoustics, that is, the sound in a public place is far different from what it is in a house. And because the hard of hearing person has not heard under these circumstances for many years, it may require many trials before getting accustomed to such public places. The volume and tone control may have to be readjusted in these public places and it is advisable to try sitting in different parts of the same hall to discover the place where one hears best.

8. It is important to understand that you **must not** put the hearing aid away or turn it off until suddenly you find there is something **you want to hear**. If you turn on the hearing aid just when you want to hear that "special thing," the shock is often too much for comfortable use and concentration. Therefore, the instrument must be kept turned on and used, **even if you are not talking to a person, for at least five or six hours every day** if you want to get the maximum benefit from it when you **want** to talk to one or more people. **The longer you wear the hearing aid when you are not talking to people, the better you will be able to hear when you have to talk to them.**

9. The time required for each stage and the eight stages depends entirely on the individual case, the type and duration of deafness, and the age of the patient. Few can put a hearing aid on the moment they buy it and wear it comfortably for eighteen hours. The average period of readjustment is approximately six weeks, at the end of which time the patient may be able to wear the instrument constantly. Most patients relearn the first four stages in a week or so, but many find great difficulty with the later stages, especially folks over sixty-five. It is important to determine, with the help of the consultant, how much hearing you may **expect** to recover with the hearing aid and **what you may not be able to hear.** Only by discovering what you cannot do with a hearing aid can you be reasonably happy with it.

10. Because the radio is seldom as clear and natural as the direct single voice in the room, this additional distortion often makes it difficult for certain people to understand over the radio. Moreover, too many radio speakers talk too rapidly for good hearing.

To assist in listening to the radio, follow these instructions: (a) Have a member of the family tune the radio so that it is right for him at six feet. (b) Sit six feet away and adjust your hearing aid carefully. (c) You may not be able to understand speech immediately, therefore, listen to music at first and try to identify the different instruments and voices. (d) **Do not** attempt to listen to plays or several speakers. News commentators, speaking slowly and evenly, are best. Gabriel Heater and Kaltenborn have excellent voices for this purpose. Try to listen to them regularly. Your range of understanding may increase with time and practice.

11. The use of the hearing aid at work depends on the individual circumstances and should be discussed in detail.

**Inattention**

After a number of years of deafness, most people become a bit absentminded, at least as far as listening to sounds and speech is concerned. The reasons for this must be understood if the hard of hearing, their families and friends are to make the fullest adjustment with a hearing aid.

Since all sound comes to the hard of hearing much more faintly and dully than to normal ears, the reaction to sound is less quick and sharp. When one calls mother or father, the mother or father with normal hearing reacts and answers in a certain quick way. To deafened ears, that call is so faint and vague that the patient often is not certain that he or she has heard **anything**. In the first stages, the patient will tend to look around. After a number of years, especially if the hearing has become worse, the patient will not react at all to these sudden calls or noises, even though tests show that by paying close attention he can hear these sounds. In very old cases and people the full sound and meaning of words are forgotten and it may require weeks or months with an aid before

words are understood as rapidly as most people speak.

When it is no longer possible to understand in church, at a meeting or in a show, the patient of course stops going to these places. His attitude towards conversation is quite different. Since this is the last tie with the world of sound that affects those nearest and dearest to us most, the patient clings to this circle desperately. Rather than believe that this tie is cut, he will strain to listen and hear, even though it may bring on nervousness; and when this does not succeed the patient will **imagine** what he or she does not hear. In time, however, he realizes that this effort and strain are not worthwhile. The penalty is at first to withdraw mentally from the group—blankly or to a newspaper or sewing—and finally to get off physically in a corner or in another room by himself. When this final loneliness has become a tragedy—the deafened repeat to themselves: "What **is** the use of listening anyway?" After a number of years they **stop paying attention completely** except when a speaker is close or loud enough. It is difficult to realize that this inattention can be come such a habit that, even when a hearing aid returns 50% or more hearing, the deafened must again learn to pay attention.

Those who have been hard of hearing for only a few years, especially if they are under sixty-five, generally relearn to react to sound and speech rapidly and normally with a hearing aid. Those with deafness of longer standing and those entering their seventies have a more difficult time, especially when someone speaks suddenly or changes the subject unexpectedly. The additional difficulty in these cases is due to the fact that **inattention gradually changes to absentmindedness**, or rather to living with one's thoughts. It requires considerable amplification of sound, the cooperation of family and friends, and readjustment on the part of the deafened to break this habit.

### Don't Go Too Fast

Before any violent attempt is made to pull the patient out of himself, several things must be understood.

Few young people realize these hectic days that even with normal hearing it is natural, sometimes before the age of sixty-five, to become lost in one's thoughts and memories. The poets have written a great deal about this and have seen much that is right and beautiful in this living with the more vivid past. Deafness merely cuts off a little more of the impact of the present and outside world and adds to the temptation to live with one's thoughts.

Recent and younger cases can and should be broken of this habit as quickly as possible when they have procured a hearing aid. In the beginning, the easiest way of accomplishing this is for family and friends to avoid bursting out with a long, rapid and involved sentence, especially during the first few weeks of wearing an aid. Family and friends would help a great deal if they would follow these instructions: Before proceeding to tell "what's on your mind,"

**get the attention** of the patient by **first calling his name** and then being certain that he **is** paying attention. If then the speaker will talk slowly, distincly, and in short sentences, it should not take very many weeks before younger and more recent cases do not require this special consideration any longer and **become convinced that listening brings results.**

Older cases and individuals, however, except for the few who are unusually alert, require more patience and understanding on the part of family and friends. Sudden and loud noises are apt to upset those over sixty-five; jarring them out of their thoughts and reveries may be actual cruelty. They can be weaned away from their deep memories, but it must be done with gentleness and great patience. If family and friends will come closer, call softly and **then wait a moment** or two until mother, father, granny or grandpa turns slowly and says "yes?" this last obstacle to attention, listening and understanding will be largely overcome.

# Take Home Pages

## Improving Communication With Others

Used with permission of Reginald D. Wood, member Central New York Association for the Hearing Impaired, Syracuse, New York, July, 1981.

"How should I talk to those with impaired hearing so that they can better understand me?" This question is sometimes asked by friends of the hearing impaired. Although hearing loss is a leading ailment of older people, relatively few of those with normal hearing understand just how they should speak to them. As one who has experienced a hearing loss for many years, I have attempted to answer this question with the following letter. It has been suggested that such a letter might help others.

To All My Friends:

Due to increasing hearing loss, I no longer hear you as in the past. If you will keep in mind certain points when talking to me, the mutual frustration of having to repeat your words can be avoided. Here they are:

Be near enough when speaking to me. This is determined by trial and error.

Keep looking at me and be sure I can see your lips—I often attempt to read them.

Please don't continue doing something else when talking to me. Let us give each other our undivided attention.

Always start with the subject—if I don't get it, try saying it another way.

Pause after proper names or unusual words to make sure I understand—if not, try to explain or spell it out.

Please don't shout. It causes distortion in the hearing aid and is often painful. A tendency to talk louder as you come nearer is especially painful.

Keep an even voice and avoid dropping it near the end of a sentence.

Speak distinctly and not rapidly. When properly spoken, English is a beautiful language.

Speak pleasantly. A smiling face and a pleasant voice avoid tension.

Where possible, avoid talking in noisy places. Background noises are greatly amplified in a hearing aid and hamper my ability to distinguish your voice.

Many of the above points are merely good speaking habits which those with normal hearing are apt to neglect. So acquiring the habit of good speech helps all of us!

Yours for better speech,

Reginald D. Wood

# Chapter Five MEMORY AND RECOLLECTIONS

## Remembering The Things We Don't Want To Forget

# Introduction

## Memory And The Environment

Scientists used to think that memory was one capability, as if our minds were large plastic bags stuffed with bits and pieces of ideas and information. According to this theory, as people got older, the plastic bag ripped, scattering ideas and thoughts along the way. We know now that memory is much more complicated than this. It involves not one, but at least three different ways of storing the information we need in our daily lives.

First, there is sensory memory. Like a camera or tape recorder, sensory memory takes in only brief glimpses, images, or phrases. When we catch sight of a friend unexpectedly hurrying past us on the street, or when we hear a snatch of a familiar song on the radio in the middle of a conversation, we are using our sensory memory. But if vision or hearing is not as good as it used to be, sensory memory may be impaired.

Next there's the part of memory used for short-term storage; we can think of it as a "messy desk." This is like the top of a desk or dresser, or that famous kitchen catch-all drawer. Here's where we find such items as "I must remember to call her back," or "Turn off the stove." Like a desk top or kitchen drawer, this short-term storage has only a limited capacity.

We can clean up our "messy desk" memory by doing things to organize it and help it along. Politicians train themselves to remember names; accountants learn to remember numbers. Others may be born with this particular skill. This part of memory is easily affected by other aspects of our lives, especially medication, diet, lack of exercise, health, mood, or stress level.

Last comes the "memory vault," that part of memory that is used to store events of our distant past. In our "memory vaults" we store specific items like the name of our first schoolteacher, and the tunes or hymns first heard long ago. Do you remember the names of streets where you lived? The people you went to school with?

The ability to recall information from memory is based on a number of different things, including the following:

**Physical Movement:** Familiar motions that accompany thinking help us remember how to sew, cook, work with wood, or follow old paths through a city. We can recall how to do many activities from dancing to lawn bowling, even if we can't describe them any more.

**Attention:** Paying attention when we first learn something new, whether a person's name or directions to a store, improves the chances of storing it in the memory vault. Taking steps to improve concentration when we try to recall also helps. Usually this means getting rid of distractions in the environment.

**Associations:** Triggering memory with special words, smells, images, or sounds helps us to associate our feelings with certain thoughts. Does hearing a special melody remind you of your first

love? Does the smell of baking bread bring back memories of people and places from long ago?

**Two Heads Are Better Than One:** Shared memories are easier to recall. Two people who worked together reinforce each other's memory for what work was like; a husband and wife or two sisters together may have a good memory for family affairs. Neither person may realize how dependent she or he has become until the other half of a memory team is not there.

Well, you might ask, if memory involves so many of the things I do every day, why do I sometimes forget?

**Competition For The Mind's Attention:** All of our memory skills —sensory memories, messy desks, and memory vaults—are affected by our abilities to pay attention and to be alert. If noisy surroundings, physical pain, family problems, or other worries are on our mind, it's much more difficult to concentrate. Also, the side effects from certain medicines can interfere with our ability to pay attention.

**High Pressure Situations:** People of all ages forget answers to questions when they feel nervous or "on the spot." A bit of planning and practice before going into stressful situations can reduce the pressure we experience and improve our recall.

**Lifelong Memory Gaps:** People who've never been able to remember names, phone numbers, directions, or dates are not likely to turn into sudden experts as they grow older. We can fall into a trap of judging our memories according to someone else's expectations of what we ought to know or do.

**Vision And Hearing:** Obviously, if you don't see or hear something properly, you won't remember it correctly. Sometimes people think they've seen or heard the information, when in fact they have not—at least not completely.

**Automatic Memory Stops Being Automatic:** When we were younger we could trust our hands to remember the notes on the piano, or our eyes and feet to drive us home "automatically." But changes in vision and hearing can make it difficult to rely on this kind of "mindless activity." It's more difficult to drive when eyes and ears aren't reliable. It's more stressful to walk if we're not sure of being steady. Because we have to think consciously about doing so many things that were once automatic, it's harder to concentrate on other things at the same time.

**Lack Of Practice:** Sometimes we expect to remember things we have had no practice doing or have little opportunity to use, such as songs we rarely sing or phone numbers we rarely call. Since it is easier for the mind to recognize familiar information than to recall knowledge infrequently used, it stands to reason that what we have talked about or done most often throughout our lives is what we will remember best.

**Lack Of Demands By Others:** If no one is around to ask for the information we have, we don't have much reason to use our current memory. Our memories aren't lost; they're just not used.

**What We Know We May Not Be Asked For:** We may have fifty or more years of knowledge that nobody asks us anything about—life in the old country, how to make a quilt, work during the "war years," planting a garden. Other people may think older people don't have the answers; in reality, those others don't have the right questions.

**Memory Impairment:** "Senility" is a very general, practically meaningless term that was used in the past to refer to mental problems assumed to result from aging. Recent investigation has shown that many memory lapses are in fact symptoms of specific and often treatable conditions. Dietary deficiencies, diabetes, stroke, or physical traumas can all produce periods of forgetfulness, as can alcohol or drugs. Sedatives, pills for high blood pressure, heart medications, or over-the-counter medicines may create memory difficulties as a side effect.

Unfortunately, the word "senility" persists as an inaccurate and misleading explanation for the behavior of older people. Many of the normal emotional responses of the elderly—depression, grief, or anxiety—are incorrectly labeled senility. Sometimes an older person living alone in a poorly lit home with little opportunity to communicate with others is wrongly scorned as senile.

People who suffer serious memory impairments (only about 10% of the elderly population) also have difficulty performing routine tasks or taking care of themselves; they will appear quite confused most of the time. This discussion is probably not appropriate for them. It is intended for the majority of people who are experiencing the kinds of memory problems associated with everyday forgetfulness.

As moderator, you can reassure the members of your group that as long as they can take care of their everyday activities and responsibilities, forgetfulness is not usually a sign of a serious disorder. If someone is still worried, you might suggest that he see a physician for a good medical evaluation.

**Misjudging Our Memory:** Most older people judge their memories to be much worse than they really are. Perhaps we expect to be forgetful or even accept the stereotypes that others have about "absent-minded senior citizens." The longer we live, the more memories we have to recall; perhaps we don't give ourselves credit for how much we've learned in a lifetime of living.

**Being Younger Doesn't Always Mean Remembering Better:** Children forget to do their homework and make up excuses. Adults forget to do things and contrive elaborate explanations. So don't think that just because you've passed a certain age that your forgetting means you have a problem. Take a close look at people younger than yourself and see how often they slip up, too.

Unfortunately, there is no magic for transforming ourselves into walking encyclopedias. But we can share hints with one another about how to change the surroundings to improve our memories. Open discussion can take the worry out of forgetting. Not too surprisingly, the more we relax about our memories, the more we remember!

## One: To Keep In Mind

☐ For a discussion totaling one hour and thirty minutes, plan approximately:

- 15 minutes for introductions and Getting Started
- 1 hour for Guiding The Discussion
- 15 minutes for Ending The Discussion

Additional time breakdowns are suggested in this chapter. Also take time for a stretch break about midway through the meeting as noted.

☐ Make sure each person gets to respond to a question during Getting Started. This may mean asking some people direct questions, and asking others to hold back.

☐ Listen for the words people use to describe the surroundings and use their words when asking questions or encouraging discussion.

☐ As you discuss each topic during the session:

- Refer to and repeat examples people give during Getting Started to illustrate points;
- Encourage people to come up with ideas for other ways to make adjustments that may not have been mentioned;
- Give people a chance to come up with their own responses before using examples or tips given in the chapter or shown on the Big Pad;
- Use the Big Pad as a visual reminder of the topic being discussed, and to summarize the main points.

☐ Be prepared for some people to reject suggestions of others. We all have our own habits and new ideas may take a little time to accept, or may not make sense for our particular ways. Give ideas time to sink in or tell people to use whatever seems right for them.

☐ Make a list of any questions that come up which are appropriate for experts to answer.

## Especially For The Memory Discussions

☐ To help people talk about their forgetfulness, share your experiences with forgetting things, too.

☐ If people seem to have misconceptions or unrealistic expectations about the meeting on memory, make it clear that this session is for the exchange of hints about ways to remember things

(especially by using the environment), not for magically transforming people's minds.

☐ Make a list of memory problems people bring up and use them during the Hint Sharing activity near the end of the session.

☐ If people express concern that their forgetfulness is a sign of "senility," reasssure them that as long as they can take care of everyday activities and responsibilities, forgetfulness is not usually a sign of a serious disorder. If someone is still worried, you might suggest they see a physician for a good medical evaluation.

# Two: Just Before The Meeting

☐ Come ahead of time to arrange the meeting place and make sure you have everything you need. Ask people who arrive early to help you with arrangements. Some things to check:

- Chairs arranged around a table, or in a circle with paths for easy entry and exit
- Good lighting, without glare
- Little or no background noise (close doors and possibly windows)
- Comfortable room temperature and ventilation
- Ample space for movement and display

☐ Ask people to assist you with setting up these items which you need to bring for this meeting:

- This guidebook
- Copies of the Take Home Page for everyone
- Pens for anyone who might want to take notes
- Big Pad (open to picture 27)
- Table, chair, or easel beside your chair for the Big Pad
- Watch or clock
- Paper for a list of Hints To Try
- Name tags as reminders for new group members

☐ Introduce yourself after everyone has arrived and is settled in. Hand out Take Home Pages so that people can make notes and so they have a personal reminder of the important points of the day.

☐ Go around the group with introductions. Use your personal touch to help put yourself and the group at ease.

☐ Name the topic, "Memory And Recollections: Remembering The Things We Don't Want To Forget." Explain that the meeting will last about an hour and thirty minutes.

☐ Describe the focus of the discussion: "During the next hour and a half we want to share ideas about aspects of our lives that make things hard to remember and the tricks we've discovered which make things hard to forget. We'll also talk about and practice ways we can avoid feeling embarassed if we do forget. And we will discuss how our memories work and why we might remember some things but not others."

☐ Encourage group members to participate and share their own experiences and hints. Explain that you are not an authority; each person has learned to be an expert problem-solver in one way or another and we want to bring that out today.

☐ Ask your partner or a volunteer from the group to make a list of Hints To Try as good ideas are described during the discussion.

# Three: Getting Started

## I Remember . . .

**(15 minutes is suggested for discussing what everyone remembers well. Encourage everyone to participate. Let people give their own examples before using a few of the examples below that are appropriate for your group.)**

27. I remember. . .

☐ We're all better at remembering some things than others. What kinds of things are you good at remembering?

☐ How about:

- Places and directions?
- Bible verses, poems, or songs, like the person in the illustration?
- Flowers, woodlore, or wildlife?
- How machines work?
- Recipes, like the other person in the Big Pad?
- How to cook?
- Stories or jokes with punchlines?
- Health problems and remedies?
- Names and faces?
- How much things cost?
- How to knit, sew, or crochet?
- How to play card games or chess, like the other person in this picture?

- What other kinds of things are you good at remembering?
- Why do you think you remember those well?

☐ We've talked about what we're good at remembering. What about things we're good at forgetting? What kinds of things do you forget?

**(Share your own examples of forgetfulness, too.)**

☐ What have you done or seen others do to make some of these things easier to remember?

# Four: Guiding The Discussion

Memory is made of:

1. Looking and Listening
2. Concentration
3. Habits
4. Reminders
5. Practice
6. Avoiding Needless Worry

**28. Remembering. . .**

☐ Does anybody have any ideas about what might help or hinder our ability to recall things?

☐ For the next several minutes, we will be talking about those things listed on the Big Pad that memories are "made of":

- Looking and listening
- Concentration
- Habits
- Reminders
- Practice
- Avoiding needless worry

☐ From your comments, it seems that some of you already recognize how these affect remembering.

**(As the following points are discussed and people bring up things they forget, encourage everyone to suggest ways to help, and write down their good ideas. But be prepared for some people to reject others' ideas.)**

29. I thought she said Thursday at ten

**(5 minutes is suggested for talking about looking and listening. Give people a chance to come up with their own examples. Then describe the illustration.)**

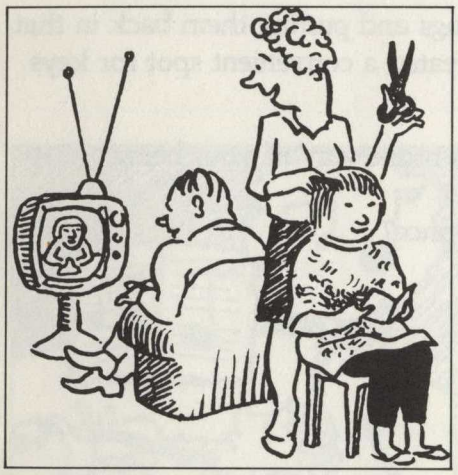
☐ Have you ever known people who blamed their memories when they didn't hear or see something in the first place? What happened?

**(Give people a chance to come up with their own examples. Then describe the illustration.)**

☐ This person seems to have gotten his times or his dates mixed up. It's possible he didn't hear them correctly in the first place.

☐ Has anything like this ever happened to you?

☐ Has anyone ever checked a price tag in a store and found out later they misread it?



30. Distractions disrupt concentration

**(9 minutes is recommended for discussing concentration and pressure.)**

☐ Distractions, like the TV in this picture, can make it hard to concentrate. What are some of the things that distract you?

☐ How about:

- Other noises or people doing busy activities around you?
- Worry?
- Pain?
- Pressure?
- Glare?
- Side effects of medications?

☐ What happens?

31. Relieve pressure

☐ Feeling pressured can make us forget things we really know, and makes paying attention difficult. What are some situations in which you felt too nervous or rushed to remember something?

- Taking a driver's or other test?
- Answering a clerk's questions when people are waiting in line?
- Filling out a form when someone is looking on?

☐ What worried you most in that situation?

☐ Any suggestions for avoiding that worry?

☐ What would worry you most if you forgot something while a line of impatient people, like those in this picture, stood behind you?

- What the nurse or others in line thought?
- Time pressure?
- Any suggestions for avoiding these worries?

32. We are all creatures of habit

**(7 minutes is suggested for talking about memory habits.)**

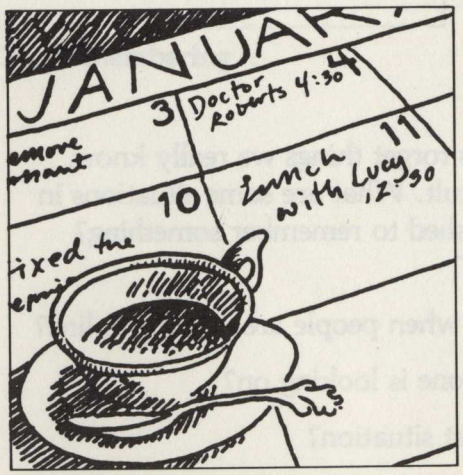
☐ As creatures of habit, the way we've done things throughout our lives affects our ability to remember now. Some of us have bad habits like this careless fellow putting his glasses down in the flowerpot. Others of us have good habits like being well-organized. How can being organized help us remember things?

☐ Tips for organization:

- Making lists
- Keeping files, like the person at her desk
- Reviewing family albums or letters before a visit
- Having a certain place for things and putting them back in that place, like this person who has created a convenient spot for keys by the door

☐ What makes it difficult or gets in the way of your being organized?

- Too many things going on at once?
- Not feeling well?
- Old habits?




33. There are all kinds of reminders

**(7 minutes is recommended for a discussion on the reminders everyone uses.)**

☐ There are all kinds of strings we can tie around our fingers. What reminders do you use?

☐ Tips—reminders:

- Make a list
- Use a calendar or date book like the one shown here for appointments, etc.
- Use egg cartons for your daily pills
- Set the timer on the stove
- Ask someone to remind you
- Put reminders where they will be seen
- Direct reminders, like lists, are sometimes better than a string around a finger—it's easy to forget why the string is there

☐ What are other "everyday" reminders we count on to help us remember?

- Daily newspapers
- Clocks
- Smelling something cooking
- Your sister calling
- The neighbor's dog barking

Some of these involve your senses—hearing, sight, smell, and touch.

☐ Our usual reminders are missing if we do something out of the ordinary. What reminders are missing if we go away on a trip, retire, or move?

**Stretch:** Let's take time for a short stretch break before we continue talking about ways to remember.

34. Practicing helps

**(7 minutes is suggested for discussing ways to practice remembering.)**

☐ It's hard to remember something we don't use or repeat to ourselves. You've probably never forgotten the multiplication tables you learned as a child or a phone number you call regularly. Why do you think you remember them so well?

☐ What are some different ways people practice to help them remember?

☐ Tips:

- Repeat out loud or to yourself several times
- Write things down several times
- Rehearse something, like this person practicing the violin
- Ask someone else to quiz you
- Perform some action a number of times

☐ Have these always worked for you? If not, why not?

35. Avoid needless worry

**(7 minutes is recommended for discussing worries about forgetfulness.)**

☐ If a teenager burns the dinner while talking on the phone, that's called carelessness. But if an older person leaves the kettle on the stove too long it's called a memory problem.

☐ Have you ever heard of anything like that happening?

☐ What are some reasons that the same behavior (forgetting) is seen differently in younger and older people?

☐ Have you ever felt that others just expect that you'll forget more now?

☐ How much has your memory really changed, or do you just **notice** that you forget more now?

☐ **Summary:** So, these are some of the things memories are made of.

**(Turn back through the pages of the Big Pad and read the captions.)**

## Hint Sharing

**(15 minutes is recommended for sharing things about ways to remember.)**

☐ Let's take a few minutes to think of ways to handle some of the forgetfulness people have mentioned.

☐ When do you have an especially hard time remembering things?

☐ What can we do or say to make those situations easier for ourselves and each other? Are there some ways we can minimize our embarrassment, or bluff graciously?

**(If people can't think of answers, ask two of your more verbal group members to pretend or act as if they are bluffing their way through an awkward situation.)**

☐ How would you handle these situations?

- Meeting someone at a party but not remembering his name
- Responding to criticism about forgetting an appointment or shopping list

☐ Who has an idea about what to say if you forget someone's name?

- Tip: "I don't recall your name, but I remember that nice conversation we had."

☐ What if your doctor or a family member asks what you had for lunch yesterday and you don't remember?

**(Remind people they can respond to a general topic, rather than answer a specific question. For example, if you don't remember**

what you ate, you might respond by describing how well balanced and nutritious your meals have been lately.)

☐ What if someone teases you about losing your memory?

## Five: Ending The Discussion

☐ Summarize the main points of the discussion by reviewing the captions on the Big Pad. Ask everyone to help you review the good ideas they suggested to each other. Make a list of these Hints To Try to give group members.

☐ Go around the circle and ask for comments.

☐ Announce the date, time, place, and topic of the next meeting. If your group has an open-ended schedule, decide together if you want to spend another session on this topic before proceeding. If so, describe the ideas for Further Discussions listed under Where Do We Go From Here?, or come up with your own.

☐ Check that everyone has the Take Home Page, "Tips For Remembering."

☐ Thank everyone for participating.

## Additional Suggestions

If members of the group have serious vision or hearing impairments, this session can be of particular value. Before the discussion, read the entire chapter to become familiar with the information presented, and how to encourage participants to share tips and solve problems together. Also review the general communication guidelines for visually and hearing impaired persons provided in Chapter 1.

### Visually Impaired Persons

☐ Discuss whether and how memory has **improved** as a result of vision **loss.**

☐ Share strategies for accomplishing these and other vision-memory tasks:

- Remembering phone numbers, recipes, directions, names (new introductions and past); following directions to a new place
- List making for grocery shopping, reordering empty or low supplies, etc.
- Paying bills on time and financial transactions
- Making sure stove is turned off (especially when slow simmer cooking), and tap is turned off when drawing bath
- Getting exercise; singing along (hymns and holiday songs, etc.)
- Keeping track of medications—remembering to take them, identifying different kinds, etc.

- Keeping track of calendar events—appointments, birthdays, etc.

☐ In groups, such as when families or friends gather, what are some good ways of getting others to respond to our memory needs?

☐ How do you organize or otherwise use the following environments or spaces to cue or tip off your memory: kitchen, bathroom cabinet, clothing storage, garage or storage, desk, talking books and recordings?

☐ How do you manage areas which you must share with someone? How can you best help others help you use your environment most effectively?

☐ What do you now have the most trouble remembering? Who has some tips on how to overcome this?

## Hearing Impaired Persons

☐ Discuss whether and how memory has **improved** as a result of hearing **loss.**

☐ Share strategies for accomplishing these and other hearing memory tasks:

- Getting information which you must use later, such as names, phone numbers, appointment dates, travel schedules, medication instructions, etc.

- Following instructions on how to get somewhere; explaining something detailed, like a problem to a doctor

- Participating in church, temple, or other group meetings where people recite in unison, such as prayers, words, or hymns

☐ What do you want other people to know about how your particular hearing impairment influences your abilities? What are some good ways of letting others know these things?

☐ How do you organize or otherwise use the environment and your other senses to tip off your memory for:

- Household safety—fire and burglar alarms, water running, kettle whistling, etc.? (Have any of these ever caused a problem?)

- Keeping track of time while you sleep or while things cook?

- Traffic awareness when walking or driving?

☐ Sometimes people with recent hearing losses develop different ways to use time:

- Do you ever consciously exercise your memory for things that you once used your hearing for? If so, how? (For example, enjoying the rhythms of poems, dancing beats, certain types of music, or sets of sounds.)

- What has become the equivalent of noise to distract or interrupt your concentration? What do you do about it?

- Has your hearing loss influenced the amount of exercise you get? How can one maximally participate in sports or exercises with hearing losses?
- What public situations or family gatherings really make it difficult to concentrate? How could they be changed so that it would be easier to pay attention?

# Where Do We Go From Here?

## Further Discussions

☐ Using the resource list, obtain programs to help improve memory and use them with the group.

☐ Tape oral histories. Many people don't realize that they are walking history books and that other people would be interested in their life experiences. Have each person in the group tape an audio cassette about his life or about specific episodes that were important to him. People can establish their own group archive or call a local historical society, school, or ethnic association to share tapes with others.

☐ Have each person in the group tell about the most recent time she forgot something. Share tips with the group to find solutions.

☐ Especially for visually impaired members, discuss methods of marking household items, clothing, food, etc., for identification. For ideas, obatin a copy of the "Labeling" issue of *Aids and Appliances Review,* available from:

- The Carroll Center For The Blind
  Public Education and Information Office
  770 Center Street
  Newton, Massachusetts 02158

☐ For Review and More Information. During a meeting, read aloud the Introduction to this chapter, "Memory And The Environment." Discuss questions or responses that people have. Make a list of any questions that are appropriate for experts, and with the group figure out where to go for answers. If appropriate, suggest the books and articles listed under Resources And References. Also copy and distribute the Background Reading for group members interested in more information.

## Resources And References

Make suggestion lists and send them to the National Self-Help Reporter, a newsletter which describes the activities of self-help groups all around the country. To become part of this growing network, request a free newsletter subscription from:

- National Self-Help Clearinghouse
  33 West 42nd Street, Room 1206A
  New York, New York 10036

☐ For more information about memory or taping oral histories, check your local library or send for these articles and books:

- *Stop Forgetting: How to Develop Your Memory and Concentration and Put It to Practical Use*, by Dr. Bruno Forst, Doubleday & Co., Garden City, New York, 1972.
- *The Memory Book*, by Harry Lorayne and Jerry Lucas, Ballantine Books, New York, N.Y., 1974.
- *Memory Made Easy* by Robert L. Montgomery, AMACOM, New York, N.Y. 1981.
- *How to Tape Instant Oral Biographies* by William Zimmerman, Guarionex Press Ltd., Ansonia Station, Box 26, New York, N.Y., 1979.
- "A Biologist Laments and Exhorts," by Alex Comfort in *Aging in the 21st Century*, M. E. Jarvik, Editor, New York, Gardner Publishing Company, 1978.
- "Don't Knock Your Memory," by Lawrence Galton in *50 Plus* magazine, March 1981 issue.
- "That Filing System Inside Your Head," by Roy Rowan in *Readers Digest* magazine, September 1979 issue.
- "Old Memories: Memory and Forgetfulness in Old Age," by Stephen Zarit in *Human Behavior* magazine, Volume 8, 1979.

# Background Reading

## 10 Tricks To Improve Your Memory

By Louis Sabin. Reprinted with permission from *50 Plus* magazine, September 1979.

You can't remember the name of that movie you saw on TV just three days ago. You start to phone your niece and can't recall the number. Now, if you're like most of us, you nervously wonder if your memory is getting weaker with age.

Well, stop worrying. Everybody forgets things now and then. And age is not the culprit robbing you of your memory.

"A healthy person over age 40 is no more likely to forget than a person half his age," says New York City memory expert Jerome Walman. "It doesn't matter if you're male or female, what kind of

work you do or did, or how far you went in school. Anybody who is reasonably bright and motivated can remember anything he or she wants to. "Of course," Walman adds, "a person who has suffered brain damage may have trouble remembering. But that's the exception, not the rule."

**Conditioning Memory "Muscles"**

Most of us just don't take advantage of our ability to remember things. Furthermore, Walman emphasizes, every one of us can improve our memory. All it takes is a little effort in the beginning, and the determination to keep those memory "muscles" in good condition. Memory improvement is like taking a speed-reading course. The lessons can help improve our reading speed, but it takes regular practice to **stay** at the new level.

"If the readers of *50 Plus* are willing to make the effort," Wallman says, "I promise that at least three of the following 10 ways to a better memory will work for any one of them."

**1. Relax To Remember:** This is based on the psychological "law of reversed effort." For example, when you're nervous, the worst possible thing is to command yourself to relax. Instead of relaxing, you tense up more. The same thing is true of memory.

"Suppose you're trying to recall a person's name," Walman says. "It doesn't come right away, so you try harder and harder. Now it certainly won't come to you. But take your mind off it by doing something else, such as washing dishes, taking a swim, or mowing the lawn, and the name is suddenly going to pop into your head."

So, the first rule to remember is: Relax, don't strain for the answer. Let it come.

**2. Make The Connection:** Tip No. 1 dealt with old information. For programming new information into your memory banks, the magic word is **association**—the art of making connections. All memory depends on the association of one thing to another. That is, we link a new fact to one that is already in our mind. If an eighth day of the week were invented, it would be easy for us to remember its name. That's because we already know the first seven and we're tagging this one onto them.

"Let's say you just met me and want to remember my name," says Walman. "The first things you might think of are the words "wall" and "man." Now, if you picture a wall with me sitting on it, you should remember my name. But to make an even stronger association, you should have a particular wall in mind, one that is already part of your memory. Then you will be adding only one **new** factor—me—to your old wall."

Sometimes a little imagination is needed to turn certain names or facts into mental pictures, but it can be done. Practice will enable you to develop this into a really successful memory method.

**3. Use All Five Senses:** Occasionally, Walman has a student who does not make visual associations too well. In such cases, he encourages the student to assist his sense of sight with his other senses. This works because we often have very strong memories of smells, sounds, and things we've touched.

"To illustrate the use of the senses as memory aids, let's work with the wall and the man again," Walman suggests. "This time, however, add the mental reminder of how that wall felt (rough, smooth, etc.) or smelled (damp, musty, etc.). Then associate that characteristic with the man. Imagine him doing the touching or smelling. You will 'see' a man like me at the wall, feeling it the way it felt to you, or smelling it the way it smelled to you. And you'll most likely remember my name."

**4. Repeat, Repeat, Repeat:** There's an old saying, "speak a word thrice and it is thine." That's sound advice. Recent studies have shown that for most people a piece of information must be repeated at least **three** times before it is fixed in their memory banks. What's more, it is not unusual for some people to need as many as 16 repetitions.

One more hint: To increase the impression of the fact you want to remember, repeat it in a loud, strong voice. For example: "My wife's birthday is February 6! My wife's birthday is February 6! My wife's birthday is February 6!" Now, to further enforce this memory, imagine your wife holding a **large** birthday cake with six **large** candles on it. On the cake in **large** letters is the word: February. This picture and the vocal repetition will make this a date you'll never forget.

**5. Use Your Best Memorizing Times:** You have to make a speech to your club, but you don't want to **read** it to the audience. Which means you have to memorize it. Now, for most people, the best times are right before going to bed at night, and right after getting up in the morning. "Just before you go to sleep," our memory expert says, "you're relaxed and psychologically most ready to digest the material. The material will also be the last thing on your conscious mind, which will help it to make a sharp impression on your memory.

"When you get up in the morning," Walman continues, "your mind is at its freshest and ready for the mental challenge of memorizing. I always tell my students to experiment, to find out which time of day is best for **them**.

"Some of us are 'morning people,' who function best right after getting up. Others are 'night people,' whose most productive time is late at night. Find out which you are, and do your memory work at your own most productive time of day."

**6. Memorize In Comfort:** When you're trying to memorize something, you'll get optimum results by working under optimum conditions. The temperature, indoors or out, should be comfortable for you. Lighting shouldn't be too bright or too dim.

All forms of distraction (sound, movements, etc.) should be avoided or minimized. You not only want to avoid the interruption of a ringing telephone, you don't want to **worry** that it will ring. So disconnect the phone, or resolve that you will ignore it until your memorizing session is over. If there is a special room or area in the house where you can be sure of isolation, that's the place to be.

"Some people are self-conscious," observes Walman. "They are embarrassed to repeat things aloud or to do other memory work even in the company of their own family. That's why privacy is important for them."

**7. Learn A Little At A Time:** Always divide your memorizing sessions into short time periods. Let's say the speech you want to memorize contains a number of issues to be voted on. And let's assume that you'll need 16 impressions or repetitions to learn it. "First, do four repetitions," Mr. Walman advises, "then stop for a short rest. Do four more, and rest again. Continue this until the 16 repetitions are completed. Then repeat the four repetitions in the same way until the job is done."

You can also do it in segments of eight rather than four. In any case, once you feel you've memorized the material, take at least an hour break. Then make the whole speech once more, straight through, to test yourself.

The best time to do this kind of memory work is close to, but not immediately before, the time you actually are going to need it. If you try to do it immediately before, the pressure of the deadline will make you tense, hindering your ability to memorize. Remember, relaxation is the key to remembering.

**8. Get In The Mood To Remember:** Use your emotions to aid your memorizing. This is a technique used by actors and actresses. "It's also a good technique to follow for any kind of memorizing situation," Walman believes. "Whatever emotion you choose—sadness, happiness, anger, jealousy—the more appropriate it is to the material being memorized, the better it will be." For example, you want to be persuasive and convincing in that speech you have to make. So get yourself into a persuasive mood—and memorize your speech by repeating it in a convincing voice.

The only time to change your particular memorizing technique is when it stops working. This can happen to all of us. After a while, the mind simply rejects the same learning pattern, as if to complain that it's boring. That tells you to experiment with other patterns, such as a different location or time of day.

**9. Organize, Then Memorize:** Before you start to memorize any material, read it carefully, to understand it as well as possible. Then, either mentally or on paper, put it in outline form. Next, study the material point by point, as you outlined it before actually setting about memorizing it.

For example, let's say you are going to teach a group how to train a dog to obey commands. After reading all the material you have on dog training, divide it into separate categories under headings such as "Sit and Stay," "Walk, Come, and Heel," "Tricks," and so on. Then each category will have its own sub-headings. Under "Tricks," for instance, you'd list (a) begging, (b) rolling over, and (c) shaking hands. If you have organized your material properly, the memorizing part will go smoothly and quickly.

Now, imagine that you have to memorize "Mary had a little lamb..." which you have not seen or heard before. First, you see that it's a poem, and that it uses rhythm and rhyme. Rhyme is a very good mnemonic device (a method that helps one to remember something) and it will help you to memorize the poem.

"I would also try to become a part of the situation," Walman says. "Perhaps by seeing it from the lamb's point of view, or Mary's. Then I would do what was described in tip No. 7—break it down into segments, do a series of repetitions, complete the memorization, and review the poem to make sure I have it right."

**10. Let Your Body Help You Remember:** When you're trying to remember what you memorized, help yourself do it by re-creating the **physical** conditions at the time of memorization. Were you sitting or standing? Did you wave your arms? Were you speaking loudly or softly? Was the room cold or warm? Was it light or dark? Were you well rested or tired?

Obviously, it's best to memorize under conditions like those in which you'll be using the material. So, if you are going to give a speech while standing at a lectern, memorize while standing in front of a high stool, music stand, or anything that looks like a lectern. Getting your body into the right position will help your mind to remember.

If you are going to be sitting at a desk when you have to remember, memorize at a desk. If you will be using a blackboard, a slide projector, or some other device, use it in the same ways while memorizing. Clearly re-creating the conditions of the original learning situation will be an enormous help.

"It's amazing how faithfully the body and the muscles remember the positions and conditions of times long past," Walman says. "A whole theory of psychology—Rolfing—is based on this concept. And the same truths apply to memory."

**Keys To Success**

You don't need to use all 10 of these tips to improve your memory. If you master seven or eight, you should do quite well. Just keep in mind that the keys to success are relaxation, organization, and being in a good frame of mind and physical condition. Your memory simply won't function the way you want it to if you're tense, tired, emotionally upset, or physically ill.

And one last bit of advice: Don't let anyone tell you your memory fades after 50! Like a leg or arm muscle, the more you use it, the stronger it will be.

# Take Home Page

## Tips For Remembering

**Get Information Right The First Time:** Double check if you're not sure about something you've seen or heard.

**Be Aware Of "Memory Thieves":** If you're worried about other things, haven't slept well, or are taking certain medications, don't depend on your memory alone. Carry a note pad with you in a place you'll be sure to notice it.

**Plan Ahead For Pressure:** If you know you're going to be in a situation where you'll be nervous about answering questions, try to prepare for it.

**Concentrate:** Pay close attention whenever you learn something new, especially names of new acquaintances.

**Avoid Distractions:** Take things one at a time. A person who makes an appointment on the telephone while the TV is going may get the date wrong.

**Organize:** Re-arranging things in your house so that they are orderly and predictable will directly and indirectly aid your memory.

**Reminders:** Use anything you think might help—lists, calendars, other people, sounds. Put reminders where you'll notice them, not hidden away in pockets you never use!

**Practice:** Practice the things you want to remember. Write them down several times, repeat them to yourself, make a picture in your mind.

**When You Don't Remember:** Don't worry about it. Everybody forgets things sometimes. Have a good laugh and take it easy. If you're in an awkward situation, respond to the general topic or just bluff!

**Exercise And Eat Right:** Walking, swimming, and other forms of exercise improve blood circulation and relaxation. A balanced diet can help improve memory, too.

American Foundation for the Blind
15 West 16th Street, New York, New York 10011